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NORA'S LOVE TEST.

VOL. III.

NORA'S LOVE TEST.

BY

MARY CECIL HAY,

AUTHOR OF

"OLD MYDDELTON'S MONEY,"

"THE SQUIRE'S LEGACY,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1876.

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251. d. 645.

LONDON :
PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE,
BLENHEIM STREET, OXFORD STREET.

NORA'S LOVE TEST.

CHAPTER I.

If any touch my friend, or his good name,
It is my honour and my love, to free
His blasted fame
From the last spot or thought of blame.
GEORGE HERBERT.

WILLOUGHBY FOSTER travelled back to London with his guests on Monday afternoon; resolved to exhibit in no half-light his irritation against Nora's neglect of his invitation, and to prove himself highly and justly injured, beyond the power of her soothing—either by unusual apologies or by her usual merry unconcern. Yet, even as he propped and strengthened his resolution (which had been built suddenly on the arrival of the Penningtons

at Heaton without her), he was perfectly and uncomfortably aware that her very first smile would utterly disarm him of all wrath and resentment; and that all that was best and sunniest in his nature would even then, as ever, go out to meet her. So, in spite of his reiterated assurances to himself that he was justifiably angry with her, it was a great disappointment to him to find that she had not returned before them.

"Mrs. Brunton is always so tiresome in pressing guests to stay," he fumed, pacing the quiet drawing-room. "Shall I go over for Nora, Mrs. Pennington?"

Mrs. Pennington reflected for a few moments.

"Mrs. Brunton mentioned particularly in her note that she would herself see Nora home. You will dine with us, Willoughby, and, if they do not come to dinner, the carriage shall go afterwards."

"Or may I take her own ponies?" inquired Will, complacently cheerful at the thought. "She will enjoy driving them home."

"Will it not be too dusk then?"

"Oh, no!" cried Will, with eagerness. "I will start directly dinner is over."

Even Celia felt impatient. She had so many

things to discuss with Nora, so many experiences to compare and incidents to relate—and indeed so much to marvel over in Will's new and uncharacteristic despondency—that she could hardly accept the disappointment of two whole hours to be spent without her. Even Will's presence at the dinner-table could not quite suffice to make the meal a blissful one for little Miss Pennington; yet it was in reality as much for his sake as her own that she fretted. Really, after disappointing him of her company at Heaton, Nora might have been thoughtful and generous enough to be at home to receive him; and, even if not that, she might have returned in time to dine with him, after his escorting them all the way from Heaton—now, too, just when he seemed so heavy-hearted and unlike himself.

She noticed that Will followed her at once from the dining-room, and that Nora's ponies were even then waiting at his order; so she stood and watched him drive off, making a pretty picture, with the roses all around her. But he turned only for one instant, and did not even seem to see her while he raised his hat. The night was so cool and fair, after the dusty day, that Celia strolled round to the terrace

above the river, and sat there in idle enjoyment, her thoughts, as usual, slight and restful, even through her new vague uneasiness.

Mrs. Pennington, after her usual half-hour's rest, joined her daughter; and they took tea out in the calm and fragrant twilight, chatting over their Heaton visit, and expressing their surprise at Nora's having changed her plans.

"If she came away at once with Willoughby," Mrs. Pennington said, looking at her watch, when she had given her cup to the servant, "they could be here in a few minutes."

"Scarcely," observed Celia, reflecting, "unless Will had driven very fast, and had chanced to find Nora quite ready to leave. Even then he would be too polite not to stay with Mrs. Brunton a little; and—— Why, mamma, here he is!"

As she spoke, Celia rose and made a movement as if to meet him; then she stopped as if she were startled, and waited for him to speak.

"I have been," he said, hurriedly, after those moments of silence, "and Nora is not there—has never been there. Mrs. Brunton has not seen her since you left for Guildford on Saturday. The carriage returned from here empty, and the servant brought a note from Nora, ex-

cusing herself, with an apology, and a pretty —— I saw the note, Mrs. Pennington. Where can she be? Oh! Celia, what are we to do?"

He was gazing at them in the blankest wonder and uncertainty, and Celia's question grew into a cry as she met his gaze, and felt a vague consciousness of misery closing round them.

"Oh! Will, what can it mean?"

"I thought something miserable was coming," he said, talking fast in his restlessness and fear, as it had always been his nature to do. "For three or four days now—ever since Poynz went away—I have felt that some sorrow was shaping itself to me, and I've tried my best to elude its grasp; but it has come at last, I think. Where are we to look for Nora? If Poynz were here——"

Perhaps it was the sudden recollection of Mark's departure, and the insight it had given him into a love stronger, quieter, and more daring than his own; or perhaps it was Celia's gentle touch upon his hand; as he stopped brokenly, that made Will turn abruptly away, pressing his hand upon his eyes and sobbing like a girl. And Celia let this unlooked-for agitation have its way, but she stood beside

him with the unuttered sympathy which he could not fail to feel.

"I think," said Mrs. Pennington, her own tears flowing gently, "that we had better question the servants."

So, avoiding a glance at Will, she rose and entered the house through one of the open French windows. The hint had been taken quickly, and, even before the bell was answered, young Foster had followed her, and, without attempting to hide the redness of his anxious eyes, he waited to see if any light could be thrown on Nora's absence.

All that the servants knew was soon told. Miss St. George had stayed at home all the time, with the exception of two drives she took —Will's start of joy and relief was unconcealed when he heard this, and from that moment his old eager hopefulness seemed to return. Miss St. George had sent a note by Mrs. Brunton's servant, but remained herself at home. Early in the afternoon—yes, Saturday afternoon— Dr. Armstrong had called, and had stayed about half an hour. At the time he left, Miss St. George had taken her maid with her, and engaged the cab which had brought Dr. Armstrong. She had been absent with Hannah about

three or four hours, and then returned and dined. All day on Sunday Miss St. George had stayed at home, spending nearly all the time in the garden, and certainly not seeming so happy and cheerful as usual. On Monday morning she had sent for a cab and driven away, with a box which she had packed herself, before Hannah was up. And they had all thought, Hannah especially, that Miss St. George was going then to pay the visit she had declined on Saturday, as she sent her order to the cabman for Mrs. Brunton's house.

The particulars, beyond this, were all supplied by Hannah, and Will excitedly made her repeat them again and again. Her mistress had not told her where she was going that morning, but had given the driver Mrs. Brunton's address, through the footman. She had bidden her good-bye twice, and given her several presents, and was even kinder that morning than usual, the girl said—growing herself dimly conscious of a possible sorrow in the air—much more quiet too, and rather heavy-hearted, it seemed. She did not know what her young mistress had packed. She supposed it was merely a dinner-dress. As she knew her mistress was away for the night, she had not intended to look over her

wardrobe until next morning, as this day had been given her for a holiday.

"I must go again to Mrs. Brunton's," cried Will, when every scrap of information had been extracted from the servants, "and then I shall go home. It is possible Nora may be spending to-day there."

"I think," said Mrs. Pennington, though feeling it very unlikely that Nora would voluntarily seek a day's intercourse with Will's sisters, "that that will be best. Then of course you will go to Dr. Armstrong's rooms."

"No," returned Will, deep in thought, "I will telegraph to him."

He was just leaving the room, when Celia entered it, gasping, and bathed in tears.

"Oh, mamma," she cried, "it isn't a dinner-dress that Nora took! I've been to see, and all her plain dresses are gone, and her cloaks, and —— Oh, mamma, she's gone to stay; I—I can see she has."

Her words and tears had arrested Will like a blow, but, even before the mother and daughter had met in their distress, he was gone, his cheeks aflame with a new pang and horror which he could not comprehend; while he told himself again and again—speaking aloud in his

great earnestness—first that Nora had been kidnapped; then that he should find her at his mother's; then that Dr. Armstrong had tempted her to spend this day in the country or on the river; and then that she had rushed on some Quixotic errand of kindness, and in her ignorance had miscalculated the time it would take her.

The beauty of the Summer night was not very fair or striking in Great Cumberland Place; but, if it had been so, Willoughby would not have known or noticed it, as he rushed from the carriage up to the door of his mother's house, and pulled the bell until its vibration seemed to fill all the silent street. He passed the astonished servant who opened the door to him, and mounted the stairs at a rush.

"Really, Willoughby," pleaded his sister Genevieve, when he had burst into the drawing-room, and had told in one breath the motive of his visit, "we ought to have a little warning before such a surprise as this. As probably Miss St. George has once again indulged her peculiar fancy for roaming alone in the lowest part of Lambeth, I should suggest that neighbourhood as the best to be searched. I wonder you suspect her of anything so common-place as

coming to *our* house, or seeking *our* society."

"I didn't," blurted out Will; "but I could not afford to miss even the faintest chance of tracing her, and I thought one of you might possibly, even if you hadn't seen her, have something to suggest which might help me."

"Dear, dear," cried Mrs. Foster, grieved by her son's anxiety, and longing to relieve him, "what can we suggest, Gena?"

"Probably we might suggest several things," returned Miss Foster, her tones even a little colder and clearer than usual. "How would it be, Willoughby, if you telegraphed to Mr. Poynz, asking *him* about Miss St. George's present abode?"

"If you were not my own sister, Genevieve," cried Will, his cheeks flaming, and his eyes wide and hot in his anger, "I would never let you suggest another thing to me again as long as I lived!"

"Of course," interposed Mrs. Foster, pacifically, "Mr. Poynz—Lord Keston I ought to say, though—can know nothing of this. How sorry I am about it, Willoughby! I will go back with you to Mrs. Pennington."

"Thank you, mother," said Will, his brief wrath sinking now in the strong under-current

of emotion. "Put on your bonnet at once then, please. I have not a moment to spare."

"Have you seen Dr. Armstrong, Willoughby?" questioned his younger sister, without looking up at him. "He was to have called here to-day, and did not. Do you think *he* could tell you anything of Nora? Perhaps she has been to him."

"Not very likely," said Will, heavily. "I telegraphed to him on my way—of course I would not let any chance escape me—but Nora never cared to be with Armstrong."

"I have my doubts of that," returned Victoria. Her temper had not been improved by Dr. Armstrong's dereliction, and she almost welcomed this little vent for it. "It may suit her to exhibit a preference for you, but I happen to know, on the best authority, that she has been *very particularly* fond of Dr. Armstrong all her life."

"Who knows more of Nora, you or I?" inquired Will, pettishly. "Armstrong tells lies if he says she is fond of him beyond——"

"Beyond what?"

"Oh, I can't wait to explain! You ought to understand. Go and hurry mother, will you?" But the next moment, without heeding his sis-

ter's cool disregard of the privilege of assisting him, Will was on the stairs himself, calling to hasten Mrs. Foster.

"I don't suppose I shall be any help, my dear," she murmured, plaintively, as her son hurried her out to the carriage; "but Mrs. Pennington may like to have me with her."

"Of course she will, mother; you are ages beyond the girls in kindness and sympathy. Jump in. You won't mind my taking you in a hurry to-night?"

They drove straight back; for Will, in his great restlessness and his characteristic hopefulness, told himself now that they might find Nora at home waiting for him, surprised—amused too, perhaps—by their alarm. But the moment the hall-door was opened to them he knew that Nora had not come.

"I shall go off at once," he said, turning to leave the house again, and addressing no one in particular, while the two elder ladies shook hands tearfully, and Celia's face was buried on the couch. "I shall go to Scotland Yard, and then telegraph to Doyle, and then to Poynz; then I shall advertise; and then—— Oh, I beg your pardon! I'm very

sorry, Doctor Armstrong. I nearly knocked you down; didn't I?"

As young Foster's head had harmlessly butted against Doctor Armstrong's chest for a moment, just on a level with his shoulders, the danger the physician had escaped could scarcely have ruffled his countenance to the extent to which it was ruffled; yet, considering his calm reception of Mrs. Foster's news, that too could scarcely have done it. Celia, who had started eagerly to her feet on the chance of his bringing tidings of Nora, stood wondering and frightened when she saw the change in his usually smooth and placid features.

"Telegraph!" he repeated, with a sneer, when Mr. Foster had run excitedly through his disordered plans. "And do you think Poynz will telegraph back to you? A man who lays his own plans so cunningly will not help you in yours—to defeat him. And a greedy old fool like Doyle is not likely to lose his richest client for Nora's sake, or your sake, or my sake. Advertise as you like; do you suppose the papers need reach her—*in Florence?*"

"I will do as I choose!" cried Will, in the very madness of wrath, and fear, and hatred of all suspicion. "I will use what means I choose;

and none of your vile unchristian surmises touch me."

"Wherever Nora may be," said Celia, with all her old gentleness, but with a new firmness in her voice, as she came and stood by Will, "she has gone for some good purpose, if she has gone of her own will. And she will not leave us in suspense, if—if—— Will, don't start so terribly! It is only the postman."

Five minutes after that, Mrs. Pennington and Celia had read the letter Nora had written to them the day before—had read the few loving lines through blinding tears—and Will had gone out alone on his irregular, impetuous search; while Doctor Armstrong stood like a man turned to stone.

CHAPTER II.

No steady power
To draw the line of comfort that divides
Calamity: the chastisement of Heaven
From the injustice of our brother-man.
WORDSWORTH.

ON the same Monday afternoon, Miss Archer arrived at her new lodgings, in a certain sleepy little terrace lying sideways in Canonbury Lane. She had driven thither from the West-end hotel at which she had been staying with her last pupil; and so perhaps that was why there struck such a chill to her heart, as she stood in the narrow passage of the small house, in its unlovely situation. She paid the man who had put her boxes down beside her, and still she hesitated, looking without and within. This was to be her home, and she was trying to teach herself at once to feel it so.

Highbury Crescent, where her new pupil lived, was within a few minutes' walk, even on these hot August days; and her two little rooms would be neat and clean; so why should she hesitate to enter them? Could she not make them as much home as any other lodgings had been during the long years through which there had been no one but herself to make home for her?

Leaving her luggage blocking the passage, Helen entered the little sitting-room, with her slow tired step. She knew the room well; she knew everything that would meet her eyes. The sultry, brick-coloured curtains; the two orange-coloured chromo-landscapes, in their black frames; the grim horsehair couch, and the few fancy articles in white crochet-work, draping the upright wooden backs of the chairs against the wall. She knew it all—the tired woman who had known so many rooms, and yet been almost a stranger in all—and so, when she turned the handle of the door, she sighed a little in real heart-weariness.

But, when she had passed the threshold, the weariness fell from her in her great surprise. Where was the grim, unlovely little room she had known and engaged? And where were the objects with which she had been trying to

familiarise herself before she entered? The bow-window, clean and bright, was shaded by soft white drapery, which checked the glare, but not the light or air. The chromos were gone, and pure, mellow-toned engravings, with white margins and narrow gilded frames, made the walls look cool as well as beautiful. The slippery horsehair sofa had vanished, and in its place were a small luxurious couch and a low easy-chair, with a pale green covering, cool as Spring-time. The old stiff chair was gone from the bow-window, and in its place were a pretty work-table and low working-chair; and on another light little table against the wall lay a few books, the titles of which made Helen's heart flutter with delighted anticipation. And there, in the centre of all, the one thing she could recollect, was the stiff round table, the ugliness of which was hidden by a pale green cloth, the tint and texture of which were soft and tempting to the eyes and fingers. And here a dainty little tea was spread, as unlike a lodging-house meal as any Helen had ever taken. The pretty green china, with its affluence of gilding; the vase of roses; the peaches nestling among cool green leaves; the whole freshness and fragrance and coolness of the beautiful little room could

be due to but one source, as Helen knew; and while she stood there, dazzled and bewildered in her gratitude, she uttered Nora's name, in a strange, low, intense way, as if it could not be kept within her heart, but passed her lips in spite of her.

And just then the folding-doors which led into her bed-room opened, and she could have seen that that room was changed as much as the sitting-room, if she had looked. But she did not look. How could she, when from the doorway came Nora herself, and put her arms about her, and kissed her; and then stroked her white cheek, and kissed her again; and then laughed a little to see how Helen was taken by surprise; and then took off her bonnet and kissed her again, and laughed a little more; and then Nora began to talk of *home*—just as if Helen had returned to her childhood's home, to find it precisely what she remembered, and to receive greetings from a whole loving family—and then put Helen into the little easy-chair, with unfeigned pride and delight; and kissed her again, and told her how good it was to see her dear, dear face, and how the tea was ready, and how there was a little breeze coming in at last! Then, quite suddenly, as she knelt at

Helen's feet, Nora hid the eyes that had been so brave, and kind, and cheering, and was conquered by a passionate flood of tears which literally terrified Miss Archer, while *she* cried too, in a joy as vague and uncomprehended as was Nora's misery.

"Oh! Helen," whispered Nora, rising when she heard Miss Archer's sobs, "how could I forget myself and greet you so? Come with me now and bathe your face, and see if you like your room; and—may I ring for tea?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Helen. "I have not bought anything yet."

"No, but Mrs. Prin—that's your landlady's name, isn't it?—says there's everything in your cupboard. She will scarcely need to buy anything, she says, for days and days. Are you ready?"

* * * * * * *

Tea was over, and Helen Archer, rested and refreshed, sat at the open window, holding Nora's hand in hers; because, she said, it was so hard to believe that the unexpected happiness of her home-coming had not been a dream, unless she saw or felt Nora's presence. And all this time the girl stood behind her, leaning

against the back of her chair, and looking over her head out into the twilight, with a sad gravity in her lovely eyes.

"How long will they spare you to me, Nora?" Helen asked, her heart heavy at the thought of parting with her dear friend, yet feeling just then that she could never really lose her again; even though Nora had not once to-day referred to a possible time when they should live together, as she had so lovingly done at their last meeting. "Who will come for you, dear?"

"No one."

Nora gave this answer very quietly, as she still stood behind Helen's chair, looking out upon the strip of Summer sky.

"Oh, Nora, I see why that is!" said Helen, in a troubled voice, which was broken by a cough. "I asked you not to tell my address, forgetting that you would keep a promise, even if you yourself must suffer; and so you are going back alone."

"The keeping of that promise," Nora returned, very low, "will prove an untold blessing to me, Helen, because I could not be with you if others knew where you were; and I have no home now but what you may give me. Oh, my dear, don't look so grieved and startled! I

ought to have told you gradually, or—or not at all; but you are so good, and have always been so loving to me. I know you will keep me with you now. I will not be a great burden to you, Helen. I will work very hard. I have had my holiday, and I ought to work now. I am ready to work—to work for us both, I hope and trust—if you will only help me a little just at first."

"But, Nora, my love, what does it mean?"

Helen had tried to rise, but Nora laid her hands upon her shoulders, and held her gently in her seat. Helen must not see the great pain it was to tell of these last few days.

"I was to have had you with me in ease and idleness," she said, with a wan smile. "I was to have given you health and strength in other countries, and rest after your long teaching. But now—oh! Helen, it breaks my heart to come to you as I come now, after dreaming of such a different meeting, and of what I might possibly give you in return for all the good you did me and taught me, in that past year which would have been so dreary to me but for your love!"

"But is it true?" faltered Helen, while her

weak breath hurried, and the tears filled her eyes. "It cannot be."

"It is quite true," said Nora, steadily. "That home I told you of on Friday in the park—you remember? How the sun was shining, and how happy everyone was!—that pretty home where I have been so happy all the Summer is mine no more. And the fortune I valued so, which was to make you well—I mean which gave me everything I wished for; and not only myself, but—— My fortune is gone, Helen, and my friends—true as they have been to me—can be friends to me no longer. Not that it is their fault. Oh, no! Don't look that question, Helen. They are true and good as ever, and—and will be kind to others. It is only *I* who must never join them again. But, oh! Helen, how can you trust me, when I dare not tell you why?"

"Nora, my darling," returned Helen, taking the girl's hot hands in hers, "if you tell me no other word, I trust you implicitly. But—think a little, dear, before you answer me—have you been frightened at all, or deceived? Does no one—no single person know this resolution of yours?"

"No. If they knew, it could not be carried

out," she answered, every word an effort to her, though she went bravely on. "It is only by not seeing them again that I can keep a solemn vow which I have made; and so, save one, who is very near to me, and has the first claim upon me—— I may not tell you more, Helen. Oh, pray, pray trust me without! It is hard to me to bear a secret. I have never had any experience in secrets all my life, and I should betray it to them—to anyone but you, whose life it cannot change, and who have always helped me so."

"Will not Mr. Poynz know?" began Helen, wondering why the words came so readily, but never wondering why Nora stopped them in such strange subdued haste.

"He would know if he saw me. He—he would know all in a minute. I could not keep anything from *him*, Helen—not anything. And that is why I dare not see him. For it is not *my* secret, and—he is never to know it; he—of all men; he—most of all who—care for me."

"Do not pain yourself so cruelly to tell me, dear," pleaded Helen, purposely now avoiding any glance into the girl's face. "But did Doctor Armstrong advise you? Shall you not see *him*?"

"Never again—never again, I hope!" cried Nora, a sudden shudder running through her frame. "Oh, Helen, keep me away from him!"

"I will keep you with me always, if I may," said Helen, with the earnestness of a dying promise; as she turned at last and put her arms round the girl who had appealed to her in such wistful, child-like fashion. "I only want you to be quite sure, my darling, that you are not deceived. From the first, I saw how Doctor Armstrong had determined to win you; and I guessed that no trifling scruple of conscience could check him. If *he* has been frightening and grieving you, just to——"

"All that he said was true," whispered Nora, brokenly and below her breath. "I know now that it was all true; but—oh, Helen, I wish you understood! I may never tell anyone—even that I am not what they think me; and so I may never speak to them, or see them. I have forfeited my wealth; and—I belong to no one. So, Helen"—with a faint, pitiful smile—"instead of having come to help you, I have come to beg a home with you; but only just until I can earn one for myself. I am used to poverty; I do not fear *that*. I only fear being, even for a time, a

burden to you, and—and being seen again by—those who belong to my old life."

"But it will be so dreary for you here, my darling, with no one but me."

"Oh, Helen, just think what it would be without you!"

CHAPTER III.

Sweet
All the ways that feel her feet;
From the empire of her eyes
Light takes life and darkness flies.
SWINBURNE.

"NORA, indeed, indeed, I cannot consent to that!"

It was late the same night, and Miss Archer and Nora at last were about to separate, after a long and almost cheerful conversation, which had not touched again upon the subject so near the heart of both. Nora had gone with Helen into the pretty freshly-decorated chamber behind the sitting-room, and had helped her to unpack, and now she was bidding her "good night," because her own room, she said, was up-stairs—far away in a cool, retired region.

"Nora, indeed, indeed, I cannot consent to

that!" Helen said again, her troubled voice broken by a fit of coughing. "For you to have a little bare and dismal room up there, barren of all comfort even, and for me to have everything here——"

"I like it very much," put in Nora, sitting down with the determination now to wait until Helen was quite at ease about her, and making her so by her own easy piquancy. "I engaged it for myself before you arrived, so you have no right to interfere, Miss Archer. It is a room highly adapted for thought and meditation. Everything there encourages reflection—except perhaps, the looking-glass—and I have a great, great deal to reflect upon, Helen. All day to-morrow I shall sit there and make plans, but first I shall take a good night's sleep—oh, no fear of that, my dear!—and I shall not try to form any plans till daylight. Would you, if you were I? What sort of a prospect do you think this street holds out for a singer of Irish ballads? I know a good many, and I can make my upper notes very telling, with a gasp upon them in the usual style. I don't think I shall hire a baby, Helen—would you? I have never given so much, or so willingly, to a singer with a baby. It's *something*, you see, to have a

baby, and the girls without one looked so much more unquestionably forlorn."

"Oh, hush!" cried Helen, hastily, though she smiled too at Nora's ease and unconcern.

"I could drive a cab, easily and very creditably," Nora went on, apparently pursuing her train of thought as her own amusement; "but women don't turn to that profession as a rule—perhaps they would be too easily led into the error of taking legitimate fares, and so bring bankruptcy on their employers, and spoil a system. No, that won't do well. Sometimes I have felt sure I could write a splendid romance, teeming with interest, and earn a fortune by it. But I begin to think that description would baffle me. For instance, I could not possibly treat a hero's hat picturesquely; and I don't see how I could take him through three whole volumes without his needing to wear or carry one, do you? My heroine I could manage beautifully in every particular; and she should have such an immense wardrobe that I could never be short of material to spread out my chapters."

"Nora," said Miss Archer, very sadly, "poverty has a wider meaning than you fancy, I'm afraid, dear. One can bear denial in one's own

person, but there is a bitter calculation it necessitates. And it is sent as often to those who are lavish and generous in their tastes as to those who are very simple or—selfish."

"That is quite true," responded Nora, bravely; "but it does not make me fear to bear it, Helen. It only teaches me how impossible it is for us to judge each other; because I feel just the same, now I can do nothing, as I did on Friday, when everything seemed in my power. Even Borak," she added presently, turning the subject, "will fancy I have quite forgotten him, won't he, Helen? For he will miss many extra luxuries and enjoyments he has had this Summer. And Kitty, and——"

"Nora, you were kind and generous to all, when the money was yours, dear," said Miss Archer, with a gentle touch upon the girl's bent head. "Can I ever forget what you were so prompt to do for me? No; no loss of money can prevent *your* being brave and generous."

"But I am so unfit to—to work well, Helen. Oh! if I had but known, that I might have prepared. You see, at first I had no money at all, and then I had too much; and now I have none at all again. And—and," she added, sorrowfully, as Helen turned away with one of her

swift, sharp attacks of coughing, "now, after all my waiting, I must do you harm instead of good."

"Under any circumstances, and at any time, you must do me good, as long as anything on earth *can* do me good. Do you remember," Helen added, gently, flushing a little as she spoke, "telling me a few words Mr. Poynz once asked you to remember, Nora—*Nobly borne is nobly done*?"

"It was at Traveere," said Nora, hurriedly turning from the recollection, as if an aching wound were touched. "I wonder how they all are at Traveere—the old cats, and Bran, and Kitty's pet pig, and—and all. Now, Helen, are you ready to say 'Good night'?"

But still she had no intention of going until she had seen Miss Archer in bed, and had put her cough-drops ready to her hand, and a glass of lemonade; while Helen told her she had not been so lovingly and willingly waited on since she was a child. Then Nora put out the light and kissed her in the darkness, trying to feel, for one moment, that she kissed the Helen Archer of old times, who had not the hectic flush upon her cheeks, and the sunken look in her meek eyes.

It was no new thing now for Helen's nights to be wakeful and disturbed, but this one would have been far more so if she had known how every cough of hers carried a sharp pain to Nora's heart; and how the girl, in her great wakefulness, lay and listened for them as for a stroke which she knew must descend upon her at stated times. Yet, next morning, it was Nora who awoke Helen with a kiss, and laid a dainty little breakfast-tray beside her.

"Oh! Nora," she cried, starting up, "how could I have slept so late, and given you this trouble? Shall I be late at my duties?"

"No, quite early," smiled Nora, arranging the tray. "I don't want you to be hurried, but, as you have a day of teaching before you, it is better not to be up too soon."

"Oh! Nora, where did—did the ham and all come from?"

"Your pantry," returned Nora, looping back the white curtains of the bed. "Helen, what step shall I take to-day towards getting an engagement? I ought to apply somewhere, even while you are away, yet I am so afraid of going out."

"Not on any account must you think of it while I am away," cried Helen, her anxiety

bringing on her cough again. "You must promise me this, Nora—you must faithfully promise me that you will not go out alone."

Though Nora could not quite understand the motive, she promised gladly, really relieved and grateful. And she said cheerfully that she should find many things to do that day, and swallowed the lump which had risen in her throat while Helen so kindly and anxiously delayed her attempt to seek a means of helping her.

"I don't know how it is," Helen said, as Nora started her off comfortably, "that I have lately fallen into a bad habit of sleeping late in the morning. But for you, I should have been late to-day; and the idleness has been growing upon me lately."

"Come home as early as you can," pleaded Nora, looking hastily away from Miss Archer's face, as she recalled the broken night, and the great weariness which the morning hours must bring. "I shall be looking for you from the moment you pass out of my sight now."

Unused as Nora was to steady application, this day at any rate was an exceptional one in her life. She finished unpacking for herself and Helen, and put her finishing touches to the three little rooms; and then she sat down,

away from the window, and worked hard and steadily, to finish an exquisite little banner-screen which she had been making as a present for Mrs. Pennington. She put it aside at tea-time, that she might have everything prepared for Helen's return; and then, when the meal was laid, and Helen's chair and slippers were ready, she went back to it, and had finished it when at last she saw Helen pass the window, and went out into the passage to meet her. Very wistfully Miss Archer scanned the girl's face when they met, but she could only guess at the struggle Nora had had to win back that easy pretty nonchalance which it gave Helen such rest and such happiness to see.

When they had finished tea, Nora showed the work on which she had been employed nearly all day. She had hesitated to do so, because there somehow seemed a satire now in its very elegance and richness; but evidently Helen did not see this, for a light broke upon her face the moment she looked at it, and, while she laid it down, still looking at it, with her hands in her lap, as if to touch it must needs hurt it, she smiled in real and unfeigned delight.

"We will not go to seek a situation for you yet, Nora," she said. "The very thought has

made my heart heavy all day. But we will go and—and—don't be hurt, dear—we will show this; and I think you will not need to ask for teaching then. You will like this work better, and I shall be at rest about you, knowing you are here, and—it must be for such a little time. Shall we go at once?"

"Oh, please let us wait until it is dark!" pleaded Nora. "I am so afraid. I think I left no possibility of anyone tracing me; but—I am so afraid."

So they waited for the friendly dusk, and then set out. Not having lost her old nature with her old life, Nora could find amusement for Helen, and to all appearance for herself, even in the uninteresting walk through Islington and along the Holloway Road; but yet Helen could feel how the girl sometimes shrank to her side, as the groups they met pushed roughly past, or turned and stared into her face.

"This is very new to you, Nora," said Miss Archer, her kindly heart sinking as she thought of her own narrow unprotected life being all Nora had to share. "You never walked at night before, in just this kind of throng."

"Never," assented Nora, with that ready tact

of hers which was born of innate sympathy, and which clothed the truth always pleasantly, "because I have never walked *here* before; and I have learnt to know, Helen, that every street or road in London has its distinct class of frequenters. Until you had tried, and studied the matter, you would scarcely believe how many grades and shades there are, all varying in some way. There, don't you see how I have studied the subject?"

"Wait, dear," said Helen, suddenly stopping before a small lighted shop—the shutters were already put up, but Nora could see that it seemed to be filled with gentlemen's slippers and caps—"I think I will ask here. Leave it all to me, please, Nora."

Behind the counter in the little shop a genial-looking, bald old man sat casting up accounts, with a diminutive young lady who bore stolidly a weight of golden plaits which would have overpowered an ordinary female of her size. Helen Archer went up at once to her and the old man, and gently and courteously asked if they would buy the screen she so carefully unfolded from its double covering, while she glanced up nervously at Nora, as if entreating her silence. But Nora was, as usual, deep

in pleasant and altogether inventive observation. This old gentleman was the master of the shop; and he had an old wife in the house, with soft grey hair; and he would not let her come into the shop to tire herself and make her grow bald, as he had done. He liked her not to belong to the shop at all; and when he joined her he forgot all about the shop himself; and they played duets every night, he on the flute, and she on the piano. And all their children were married, and came to see them at Christmas-time, with a crowd of little children. And then this girl with the gold plaits was invited to a dance, and did not look a bit as she looked now at Helen; and never all the evening spoke superciliously and hardly, as she spoke now And at last she married, and had the shop; and the old couple went to live by the river, and had a garden; and grew younger and older at the same time, until their life was rounded——

"Come, come, that is very absurd, you know! If you asked an ordinary price, I could, perhaps, order another; but fifteen shillings is outrageous. I shall not get that for it myself. Which of you made it?"

"I did," said Nora, arrested by the question, and wondering, rather amusedly, why they

should not be addressed as "Madam," a dignity which her whole experience of shopping had taught her to expect. "Do you like it?" she added, evidently with very little idea of a would-be seller of fancy articles being regarded in a different light from a lavish purchaser of the same. "I hope you do, and will commission me to make another."

"I will, my dear," the old man answered, with spontaneous heartiness; "I will give you twelve shillings for this, and ten for another the same. It is a ridiculous price, but I like to encourage the young. When shall I expect the pair?"

"You must say twelve shillings for each, at least," put in Helen, fancying that the meek demandwas made with daring and determination—until it melted utterly away under the old gentleman's genial laugh and generous bestowal of a half-sovereign and a florin. Flushing nervously, Miss Archer glanced up into Nora's face, for the money was hers, and her first earning. But Nora had only said "Thank you" quietly, and turned to leave the shop, waiting for Miss Archer.

"Oh, Helen," she whispered, when they were out in the street again, "I am so thankful!

Perhaps I shall not be a great burden upon you, after all. I shall make quantities of screens, and some slippers like those I worked for Mr. Doyle, and other pretty things; and that kind old gentleman will buy them all. Oh, Helen, isn't it a very good thing that the knowledge how to sew, and what colours blend well together, comes to us women by instinct?"

"Does it, indeed?" questioned Miss Archer, with a smile. "Now what do you intend to do with your wealth?"

"*My* wealth!" echoed Nora, sadly. "Helen, if you won't let me work for my share, and take the share from me to spend wisely for us, I must go away; and—and I've nowhere to go really, Helen—nowhere."

"Just for this once," said Helen, gently, "let me ask you if you have not seen that there was some other—and pleasanter—course open to you. Do not think I wish to know your secret, Nora—so utterly I trust you, and so keenly I should feel any trouble of yours, that I would almost rather *not* know it—but, my dear, are there not others who could help you at this time?"

"No," replied Nora, very low and steadily.

"No one but you, Helen. I have tried hard and earnestly to do the best for—for all, and I saw only this. I shall go out of their lives, and all—with them—will be as it was before. He could not take me without Doctor Armstrong too; he could not take me for myself alone, though I—was ready; and so he—he will not miss me."

"I do not understand," said Helen, in her gentle way; "but I can feel sure you will do what you think best, Nora."

"What I am most thankful of all for," observed the girl, simply, "is that I can earn money without teaching. We shall soon be very well off, Helen, and you shall go to the seaside, after all."

It was such a glimpse as this of the temperament that was sanguine—not from its lightness, but from its deeply-lying trust—which made so new a brightness now in Helen's life that she wondered sometimes (as she went to or from her duties, leaving Nora smiling at her own door, or looking for her waiting face at the window) how the old times of her utter solitude could have been borne. It was Nora's pleasant helpful companionship which brought a new lightness to Helen's step, even though it could

not bring a new strength; and it was her sweet and unfailing sympathy which threw over Helen's great patience the bright colouring of real content.

CHAPTER IV.

Before the beginning of years
  There came to the making of man
Time, with a gift of tears;
  Grief, with a glass that ran.
Atalanta in Calydon.

THUS week after week went by in the little terrace house, and only Nora's eyes, in their great love and compassion, saw the slow change in Helen. The girl broke now, unhesitatingly, the vow she had made never to go out alone. She would let neither Helen's injunctions nor her own fear keep her at home, and every afternoon Helen found her waiting in Highbury Crescent, and every morning she could part with her only in the same spot. Yet always there was the tea awaiting them, prettily laid, and something to tell, and to show; and,

best of all, there was always in Helen's weariness that silence which only two dear friends can know, full of unuttered sympathy, of fixed immovable affection, and a deep, restful trust. Certainly there were often and often recurring hours in the long solitary days, when Nora's thoughts and fears and regrets grew almost too heavy and too sad to bear, and she had a hard and bitter struggle with herself; but Helen could only guess it was so, for no trace of this struggle was left to cast the faintest shadow upon her home-coming. With unfailing and most willing industry, Nora worked all this time—in the early mornings, through the hot and weary afternoons, and often late into the night; and, besides the fancy work she sold, she would lovingly work for Helen in her absence, making her simple dresses as pretty as she could; and never feeling happier than when she could bring an involuntary girlish smile to Helen's lips at some little dainty addition to her wardrobe, which she herself would never have thought of or ventured upon. But, though once, in secret, she took in the seams of the well-worn dresses, they still, day by day, looked larger and looser on the wasting form; and when Helen now would smilingly give up one colour after another, say-

ing they made her look so sallow, it was hard work indeed for Nora to hide the agony of fear upon her face. For the unerring foreshadowing of one dark truth lay ever in her heart, and it was its very certainty which made any allusion to it such torture.

Once or twice it had happened that, when Nora—always accompanied by Helen—took back her work after dusk, the old man who had given her her first order—after his usual long, compassionate, inquisitive gaze—had paid her just a shilling or two more than Helen had guessed he would—for she was always careful to guess a little, that Nora's own hopefulness might not bring her disappointment. Then Nora had rejoiced as if another fortune had been discovered for her, and, with Irish improvidence, calculating this unexpected sum as inexhaustible, had devised a festivity or excursion, and entered into it heart and soul, carrying Helen with her in her pleasant enthusiasm, and recalling, with real laughter—though it might be akin to tears—those excursions they had planned in old times for holiday afternoons, when they had been governess and pupil. But Nora never recalled—as Helen always noticed—those later gaieties in such different localities, and in which

she had taken so different a place and part.

So the time went on, while the days shortened rapidly, and the drear November fogs came with their deathly-clinging touch to the weak and suffering; and at last there dawned a morning when Helen sank back upon her pillows when she tried to rise, and only sobbed a pitiful assent when Nora said she must not teach *that* day.

"My dear, my dear, don't cry!" the girl pleaded, kneeling beside the bed, and laying Helen's wasted hand against her cheek. "It is so natural you should want a little rest. A day's rest will do you such good."

"What is it, Helen dear?" she whispered presently, wondering at the feeble, unrestrained grief of the friend she had always known so patient and subdued.

"I may lose my engagement," sobbed Helen, her eyes growing eager, and great drops of moisture standing on her temples; "and, Nora, that means poverty—for—us both. My love, don't look at me! I don't feel like myself to-day. How can I leave you? Oh, you don't know, my darling! You look so brave that I can see you do not know one half *my* fears. Some one must come and take you away. I

will not have you here, Nora, to waste your youth and strength in care for me. Go away. Go away now, while I can bear it."

She had risen, and was appealing wildly, with her feverish fingers locked; while Nora grew very white and still in a new alarm.

"Go away, Nora; I cannot work again. I shall be useless now, and a burden to anyone who is near me. I—I cannot even breathe without pain. Listen to this gasping. What are you to do? How are you to bear it? For a long time each cough of mine has been like a stab to you. And now—— Oh! Nora, go back to those who can give you ease and pleasure; for presently—soon—there will be—— Don't start from me; I only wanted to whisper it—there will be *nothing* here, and I shall see you waste and fade as I am doing. I shall see you day by day losing your brightness and your beauty and your strength, until at last I—see no more. But you—but you, with the chill of death about you, would be faithful to the last, and your own life forfeited. Go away, Nora! I have lost now my power of helping you, and I will not have you here to die with me. I *will* not—I—— Oh! Nora, Nora!"

The cry which had broken the feverish words

seemed to fill the quiet house; but Nora had taken the sick woman's head upon her breast, and was whispering loving, cheering, tender words, and kissing the hot lips and brow and temples, and softly stroking the thin damp hair, and the wan cheek; and smiling a little at the "nonsense" Helen had talked, and at the thought of there being any other spot where she could be as happy as she was just there.

"And," she said, in that pretty, coaxing way of hers, "I am going to offer to teach your pupil, Helen, for the few days that you want rest. Do you think Mrs. Lovington will accept my very inferior services for that little time?"

Helen's weak and unusual fit of excitement wore itself out in the restfulness of Nora's words and embrace; yet still it was nearly an hour before Nora would venture to leave her. Helen had fallen asleep then; and so, after putting near her hand everything she could think of, either to refresh or interest her when she awoke, Nora set off, with beating heart, to begin the task for which she had for many months fancied she was preparing herself; but that was long ago—so very long ago!

The outside of the house in Highbury Cres-

cent was quite as familiar to Nora as to Miss Archer; but, when she had been taken into the drawing-room, and was waiting for Mrs. Lovington, she felt far more strange than she had felt during any one of those countless visits she had paid in the previous season, and she tried in vain to account for the feeling. When she had first entered the room, a gentleman had been strolling in the little conservatory which opened from it; but as soon as he caught sight of her he advanced into the room and bowed.

Forgetting for the moment that Mrs. Lovington was a young widow with an only child, Nora took him for the master of the house, and at once explained her errand.

He was a young man—an officer in the Army, Nora thought—and he had looked negligent and light-hearted; but he stood very still to listen to Nora, and it was evidently only by a great effort that he now and then turned his eyes from their curious questioning gaze upon her face.

He bowed in acknowledgment of her explanation, and then began to talk on other subjects—pleasantly, Nora thought, and very much as if he wished her to spend her waiting time agreeably. But it extended so long that at last she

wondered aloud if Mrs. Lovington could think that she was in the schoolroom.

"I will go and see," said her companion, rising with no particular willingness. Then Nora was left for quite another half-hour, before the lady of the house entered, with a chilly inclination of her head and a ceremonious greeting.

"Miss Archer—your sister, I presume—will probably be able to resume her duties in a few days," she said; "therefore you may inform her that my daughter shall have those few days as a holiday."

"Thank you," returned Nora, wondering why she seemed to excite as much curiosity in the lady of the house as in the gentleman; "but, for fear Miss Archer should hasten back before she is strong enough to do so; and that she may feel comfortable about her duties not being neglected; and that you may feel so too; may I not give my services to your daughter for the time?"

"Quite unnecessary, thanks," was the chill reply. "Is your anxiety to take her place caused by a fear that she will not recover? I see," she added, her keen eyes reading the answer in Nora's sudden paleness. "Then I

fear I must resign my claim upon Miss Archer's time. It will be better for her to consider herself free, and it will be better for my daughter not to lose any time unnecessarily. Of course I must study *her* interests first. No, thank you. It is kind, of course, that you should offer your time for your sister; but you are quite too young to have the charge of my daughter, and therefore I will not trouble you for particulars which are unnecessary. I never like to give needless trouble. Remember me to Miss Archer; I will call some morning, and I shall trust to hear a good account of her. She should get away to the sea-side for a time."

"Then you will not kindly allow me to take her place?" asked Nora, rising and making a brave effort to keep back her tears, and plead once more. But it was in vain; and in another moment she had her fingers on the handle of the door.

"Excuse me," Mrs. Lovington said then, giving words at last to the curiosity which had taken such a hold upon her, "but where have I seen your face before? I cannot be mistaken," she added, pointedly, as she coldly and suspiciously watched the pink spots burn in Nora's cheeks, "nor can my friend be mis-

taken, who chanced to see you here just now."

"I have never seen you before that I know of," replied Nora, briefly.

"I am not deceived," the lady said, with a smile which would have been bland but for its stiffness. "Do you know Lord Keston?"

The few moments' pause was broken so easily and quietly that no one could have guessed the pain which Nora had to stifle before she could answer as she did—

"No, I have never met or spoken to a Lord Keston in my life."

"At that time," pursued Mrs. Lovington, uncompromisingly, "he was only Mr. Poynz. You remember him, do you not?"

"Mr. Mark Poynz? Yes, I met him in Ireland —a long time ago."

By this time Nora was out in the hall, and, passing by Mrs. Lovington's unconvinced and rather unpleasant smile, she coldly bowed, and left the house.

"Declined with thanks, eh?" queried the gentleman, who had watched Nora out of sight, when Mrs. Lovington joined him. "Did you consider it unsafe to have her about the house after my eulogium? I feared so when I saw you go to meet her with such stern determina-

tion in your face. You silly, jealous little mater! She was a perfect lady; and, had I been you, I would have given a triple salary, on the chance of my daughter growing like her teacher."

"You think of nothing but a pretty face," said the lady, with a smile; but she congratulated herself thoroughly now on having declined Nora's services in her house.

It was but a sad home-coming for Nora; but she spoke lightly of her defeat, and bravely argued in favour of fancy-work, sewing hard all the time, to finish what she wanted to take home that night.

"I have never cared so much for going to the shop since our old man sold his business to that child of earth with the golden hair," said Nora, talking apparently only to amuse Helen, as she sat and worked beside her; "but still I like the coming-home always, and I shall like it best of all to-day, because you will be here. How often you have returned to *me*, Helen, yet never yet have I come home to find you here alone!"

"Nor will you to-night," said Miss Archer, gently. "I am much better, and shall like the

walk. You certainly shall not go without me, Nora."

Nora tried both entreaty and argument, but neither availed; so, after a very early tea—during which pleasant little meal Miss Archer looked so much better that the girl's heart grew light in her gratitude—they set out.

"I shall receive quite five shillings for the embroidery of this apron," said Nora, looking proudly down upon the parcel she carried, as they turned into Upper Street, "so we will have the indulgence of a tram, Helen. No one could possibly miss eightpence out of five whole shillings."

"You see," observed Helen, her smile dying in a sigh, "how my weakness will exhaust our funds, and—and what help can *I* give now?"

"I would not like to be obliged to say what help you can*not* give now," returned Nora, lightly, as she looked "before and after" for the tramway car.

"How strange," she said, ten minutes afterwards, when they stopped at the spot which had grown so familiar to them both, "that the shop should be closed so early! I think that girl's husband is a very idle young man, don't

you, Helen? I've often thought they only play at business."

"So have I—often feared it," Helen responded, her hand trembling a little on Nora's arm; for disappointment was an old companion of hers, and she looked for his face when Nora had no thought even for his existence. "Will you ask next door if there is—anything the matter?"

"*Why are they closed next door?*" repeated the cheerful little watchmaker of whom Nora had asked this question, looking at her through the magnifying-glass which was fixed tightly in one eye. "Because they've failed—gone to the dogs—smashed up! What's the matter?" he added presently, rising from his stool and approaching Helen, while he dropped the glass, and gave his features a good deal of free play as a rest after their tension.

"If they have, as you say, failed," said Nora, steadily and gravely, while she supported Helen in her sudden tremor, "do you think they will never pay any more for work that has been ordered?"

"Never a penny. They've bolted. Won't you sit down and rest?"

"No," whispered Miss Archer, clinging more feebly to Nora. "Let us go home."

"We will have a cab," said Nora, without the slightest hesitation, when she saw Helen's nervous distress on passing into the street. "We shall be at home in a few minutes then. My dear, lean on me while I look for one; the standing will be a little rest."

So they stood where they were, forgetting what a glare there was upon them from the shop behind; and they waited, looking anxiously and gravely at every passing vehicle, and saying no word to each other of this new disappointment.

At last Nora lifted her hand, for a hansom cab was being driven up to them.

"It is occupied," whispered Helen, nervously and hurriedly drawing Nora back, as she became aware of some one leaning forward from the cab to scrutinize them, and then turning suddenly to order the horse to be stopped. "It is some one who sees we want——"

She had no need to finish her sentence or surmise. The cold proud whiteness of Nora's face, and the great fear, and yet greater daring, in her eyes, told Helen in a moment that Nora had recognised Dr. Armstrong even before he had stopped beside them.

CHAPTER V.

Little hand holding large hand pretty tight
For all its delicacy—eh, my lord?
ROBERT BROWNING.

STRENUOUSLY as Dr. Armstrong endeavoured to meet Nora without constraint, the effort was almost a failure. Though he advanced to her and Miss Archer with a smile and a hand-shake for each, they both saw plainly that from that moment nothing would escape his furtive watchfulness; and though he very quietly expressed his pleasure at seeing them, there was a strong and suppressed self-gratulation in every word and glance.

"He was charmed," he said, in his clear and suave tones, to meet Miss Archer again, after having lost sight of her for so long. Indeed, it was a surprise to him even to have encountered

his own cousin unexpectedly after her voluntarily absenting herself; she was, he felt quite sure, enjoying her visit to her old friend. Still, had it not been rather a merciless whim to try to keep her retreat a secret? But he had no right to complain. Nora had acted with a little girlish wilfulness, that was all—charming wilfulness, which refreshed him; for if everybody always did what everybody else always expected, life would be but what the poet called a draught of dull complacency, and he, for one, had no relish for such a draught. Had Miss Archer been looking for a cab when he had had the privilege of recognising her? He had unfortunately only had a hansom at his disposal, else he would have retained his at her service."

Very quiet and cold, Nora stood through this elaborate speech; but at its close she spoke, in just her own fearless way, intercepting any reply Miss Archer could have made; while she pressed a little closer to her side the trembling hand she held upon her arm, as if fear had no power to touch her now, except through Helen.

"I don't think a cab is necessary, after all, is it, Helen?" she asked. "We felt tired and idle just at that moment, but it is only a few minutes' walk to our station, and I am sure we

need not mind—now that we have Dr. Armstrong's escort."

"*Dr. Armstrong!*" he whispered, deprecatingly. "How cruel the formal address sounds from your dear lips, Nora."

But still he could not hide with what relief he turned to walk beside her, when they started up the Holloway Road.

"Miss Archer is very tired," said Nora, presently, addressing Nuel Armstrong with quiet indifference; but with no evidence of the shrinking repugnance she felt through all her frame, or of the fear which made even her lips so white, while she was sure he would not leave them; "for we came here to do a little shopping, and it is a good way from Kilburn, isn't it?"

The sudden feeble start which Helen gave, could not be seen by Dr. Armstrong as he walked on Nora's side up the lighted road; nor could he guess anything of that reassuring and caressing touch of Nora's upon her trembling hand.

"Kilburn!" he echoed, in astonishment, and even distrust. "Are you really staying there?"

"Didn't you know, all the time I was at Great Cumberland Place, that Miss Archer lived at Kilburn?" inquired Nora, calmly, for she

knew he would go with them to their destination. "I think I often told you, and I used to fancy you had a good memory, Dr. Armstrong."

"So I have," he said, wincing again at her address. "But Miss Foster assured me she had lost all trace of Miss Archer since you left."

"Very likely," said Nora, with quiet negligence; "and we have now lost all trace of Miss Foster. Never mind talking about her. How long a walk seems in a strange neighbourhood, doesn't it?"

"The station is not far," said Helen, beginning to breathe freely again, now that she could read Nora's intentions.

"But we may have to wait for a train," sighed Nora, just as if that were the greatest trouble the future could hold for her; "and as we didn't take return tickets to-day, we have fresh ones to buy."

"You shall have no further trouble about tickets or anything else, Nora," whispered Dr. Armstrong, looking into her face with the delight (as well as the consciousness of power) which he had tried so hard to subdue. "You are tired of these tasks you so thoughtlessly took upon yourself, and ready to relinquish

them, I see. Lay them all upon me, my love; they are but trifles in my willing hands."

"What? Our tickets?" asked Nora; but her lips shook a little over the careless words.

"Helen," Nora whispered, very hurriedly, as they stood a few yards off, while Dr. Armstrong went up to the window of the booking-office at Islington station, "when we stop at Kilburn please guide us straight to your old lodgings, and don't let it be seen that the way is strange to me. Leave the rest to me. Oh, my dear, are you very tired?"

"Not at all," said Helen, below her breath; but smiling bravely, and really not feeling so tired now in her fear as she had been in her great disappointment, nearly an hour before. "I understand. You will give me your arm, I know, as you always do, and I will lead you unobserved. Will he——"

But the sentence could not be finished, for Dr. Armstrong was taking up his change, and it would not do to risk another word. They had many minutes to wait for a train, and Islington station is not a cheerful spot to linger in, but still the minutes seemed to fly for Nuel Armstrong, as once more he sat beside the girl he had sought so long, and feasted his eyes

upon the young face, which, even in its paleness and its pride to-day, was beautiful to him beyond all other faces he had ever seen.

With a courage which took the place of strength, Helen Archer led the way from the Kilburn station along the Oxford Road; and Nora followed slowly, as if her idle talk with Nuel Armstrong held her back. When they reached the Randolph Road, Helen stopped, but she had turned into it before doing so.

"Think of my hurrying on, Nora," she said then, with a smile, "and leaving you to guide Dr. Armstrong. This is not a very brilliant thoroughfare, is it, Dr. Armstrong? But the houses are comfortable, and Nora and I have never given a thought to the gloom of the street."

"Still," said Nuel, stealthily studying the locality, "it is not a cheerful home for you, Miss Archer; and certainly not a fit one for Nora."

"What is fit for Helen is more than good enough for me," interposed Nora, hotly. "And we do not need anyone else to choose or decide for us, or interfere in any——"

Helen's quiet touch, as she slipped her hand again within Nora's arm, stopped the swift,

disdainful words as if by magic; and Dr. Armstrong smiled, as much at their sudden cessation as at their meaning.

"My love," he said, in his exasperating suavity, "you will allow me, if you please, to be the best judge of what is fit for you, and of what you deserve. I have peculiar notions on that subject, perhaps, but I will carry them out at last, and your home shall be in the midst of all that is best and brightest. What! are you living *here?*"

Helen, with a warning touch, had stopped before a house, from no window of which did any light shine out; and Nora, with a little catching of her breath, answered him at once.

"Miss Archer is very tired, Dr. Armstrong, and you, as a physician, will understand how she must need rest after our excursion. So we will not ask you in to-night."

"To-morrow," he said, trying to stifle his eagerness, "I shall call, Nora. Miss Archer, will you give me your address?"

"This," said Helen, looking frankly up into his face, "is Randolph Road, and the number of this house is thirteen. Do you wish the name of the owner?"

"It might be better to——"

"Mrs. Evans," interrupted Helen, calmly. "Such a pleasant woman, too, and she was kind to me from the first day I came to live with her—two years ago."

He smiled and thanked her, taking her hand in farewell then, almost as impressively as he took Nora's. Had she not kept his darling quietly and safely through those terrible months, when his search had been so full of alarm? And would she not be obliged to resign her now to him?

Not the faintest doubt entered Dr. Armstrong's mind as to what Miss Archer had told him, yet it was his inherent suspicion, more than his courtesy, which made him stand to watch them, until the hall door had been opened, and they had coolly, and without a word, passed into the house, with the unmistakeable air of being at home. And it was his caution, more than his care for them, that made him inquire from a passer-by the name of the road, and of the occupier of number thirteen. Then, smiling to himself over the impossibility of Nora escaping him again, he walked to and fro in that dismal street, through the fifty minutes which he had to spend waiting for a train to Euston.

"Nora," whispered Helen Archer—they were sitting in the dark little sitting-room which used to be Helen's, while the woman of the house went for a light—"speak, dear; speak to me. You don't know how terrible it was to know what this meeting was to you, and yet to hear you talk as if you had no fear or trouble, and to see your quiet, indifferent reception of Dr. Armstrong. Nora, how could you do it?"

But no answer came in words, for Nora's eyes were covered in the darkness, and she was seeking strength for what might follow.

"And," continued Helen, her breath failing her now, and her words broken by a fit of coughing which brought Nora to her side in a moment, "it was terrible even to me. I—I don't know what he has done, or wishes to do, Nora—I don't ask you, dear. But he told you of no one belonging to your old life; and—it made me tremble to see his power—his great power of keeping everything hidden. I never trusted him, Nora; and to-night, when I saw what he could hide—oh! my dear, he will trace us so easily now."

"Never," returned Nora, bravely; for just then the light fell upon Helen's flushed face, and

turned every thought and fear into a longing to take her home and give her rest.

But a new trouble met them now. The woman who brought the light to them, and asked them politely (but rather significantly) what she could do for them, was not the Mrs. Evans whom Helen had known through her two years' occupation of this little sitting-room. No; Mrs. Evans had gone to her daughter for a week, the woman said, and she was minding her house. The lodgings were let, and so she must trouble the ladies to leave as soon as they heard the bell. It was awkward calling so late, she added, with a glance of curiosity and distrust which made the hectic burn in Helen's cheeks, though Nora was not even aware of it, but of course Mrs. Evans might have understood it if she had been at home.

"May we sit in your kitchen for half an hour?" asked Nora, in her gentle, fearless way. "My friend is very tired, you see; but we will go then. Not yet, please," she added, earnestly; for it did not need Helen's glance to remind her that Dr. Armstrong might watch the house until the darkness had utterly settled upon the unfrequented road; "not quite yet, if you will kindly let us sit with you and rest. I know I

have no right to ask you, but I hope you will not mind, and we will not disturb you in any way."

Though her suspicion was only half at rest, the woman led the way down a narrow basement staircase, and into a little kitchen, whose warmth and brightness gave poor Nora such a grateful sense of rest and relief, that the woman of the house literally laughed to see her childish revelling in the fire, and the sight of the safely-shuttered windows.

"Oh! Helen," she whispered, anxiously, "if this were but our own room at home! Hasn't this been a long day? And you have such a long, long drive to take. But, Helen," she added, quite cheerfully, as she saw Miss Archer's eyes fill with tears, "I can scarcely believe that it was only this very morning that I got nipped by Mrs. Lovington in Highbury Crescent, and only this evening that we found those fatal shutters raised between ourselves and affluence. My dear, will you lean your head on my shoulder and try to sleep?"

"If you'll give me the money," put in the woman of the house, after she had been standing opposite her visitors, staring from one face to the other, her curiosity roused as much by

the beauty of the one as the weariness of the other, "I'll go and fetch a half-quartern of brandy. It'll do you good."

She had concluded the speech with a glance at Helen, but it was Nora who thanked her so eagerly.

"It is very good of you to think what will do her good. I would like you to get it so much, if it is not too much trouble. What will it cost, please?"

"Sixpence."

Suddenly, as Nora stood with her fingers on her pretty little purse, a great coldness seized her, and her heart sank like a stone. Was Helen's purse empty as hers, now while they were all these long miles from home; and Helen too weak to walk another step; and lighted streets and stations impossible for them?"

"I do not need the brandy," said Helen, gently, with her sad and tired eyes on Nora's face; "and—I think we must manage without the cab, Nora. I—I have only two sixpences here."

"Then give me one of them for the brandy," put in the woman, with rough good-nature, "and I'll go at once; for you're not fit to start anywhere as you are, and I'd be as sorry for

your friend as for you, if I let you go this way. I should think you need a deal of care, and everything good that's to be got."

"Helen," whispered Nora—she had slipped to her knees beside Miss Archer's chair when they were left alone, and her lifted eyes were beautiful in their great compassion and tenderness—"I don't think our Father will let this night hurt you, because it is my fault that we are here; and I have so prayed that I may do you no harm; and—He always listens. My dear, we shall soon be home now, and you shall rest for days and days, for you have no teaching to-morrow. Oh! isn't that good news?"

Then Helen, keeping back the tears that could have flowed so readily in her weakness, took Nora's face between her hands, and kissed it very lovingly, though she could not speak. For what wonder that she had not quite Nora's trust and bravery, and could not recall the loss of her income as *good news?*

"But we must walk home," she said, with touching pathos in the simple, impossible statement.

For a few minutes Nora did not answer; then she rose to her feet, and, standing behind Helen's chair, looked down thoughtfully and

intently upon the little hoop of pearls she wore on her right hand. By the time the woman had returned and given Miss Archer the brandy and water to sip, she had drawn it from her finger, knowing that it could never be returned to her, because, when they left this house—to which Nuel Armstrong had accompanied them,—they must leave not the faintest clue to their further destination. Standing with her face hidden from Helen (because she knew how hard it would be to say it, and how grieved Helen would be to hear it), she begged the woman of the house to lend her ten shillings, and take her ring until she should bring the money back.

"What is the ring worth?" asked the woman, bluntly, as she turned it round and round in her hand. "Perhaps nothing—only you wouldn't know."

"Yes, I know," said Nora, simply, "for I bought it. It was not a present to me. I paid twenty times ten shillings for it; and if I do not come for it, you can sell it any time for the same—I suppose. Now will you lend us the half-sovereign?"

Probably, if she had found she possessed the sum, the woman would have been willing now

to give it; but she could only find seven shillings, she told Nora, after her long absence from the room, and they must be satisfied with that, she supposed.

Satisfied they were, and even grateful for it, for would it not take them home? Still they lingered, nervously afraid of venturing too soon: and while they did so they sat at the kitchen fire with the woman of the house, and talked with her so pleasantly, and so thoroughly without pride and assumption, that, when at last they rose to go, she had forgotten all her suspicions and curiosity, and simply felt that her kitchen would feel extra solitary now.

"I shall fetch a cab, miss," she said, addressing Nora in the changed tone which had gradually grown upon her.

But Nora anxiously and courteously declined this, seeing that it might leave a clue for the morrow; and then, with a kind good night and thanks, they went out into the street again.

"Isn't it nice and dark?" whispered Nora, with a reassuring pressure of Helen's hand —which, as usual, was within her arm,—and that quiet bravery in her voice that Helen understood so well. "We shall soon meet a cab, I expect, when we leave this quiet road.

I'm so glad I've seen it, Helen, because I used to have to fancy so much about your home in those old days. It was not exactly this I fancied; it was a much more tumble-down sort of house. I was so Irish, you see, that I thought everyone who was not very, very rich lived in a propped-up sort of old house, with gaps in the walls, and dogs peeping in through the gaps, and—— There's a cab!"

CHAPTER VI.

"All my days I'll go the softlier, sadlier,
For that dream's sake."

IT was a long drive to Highbury, and Nora, sitting back in her corner, and turning from the light of the streets, took Helen's hand within her own, but would not speak, even to try to cheer her as she had done whilst walking, for silence would be a greater rest, she knew. But she herself was sadly ill at ease, and only seemed to breathe quite freely when at last they were within their own house, and had seen their landlady lock and bolt the outer door.

"Now I am content," she whispered to Helen, drawing her within her bed-room, and lighting the gas to look at her. "We have not been followed, and we are together alone

again, and at home. Oh! Helen, just think what the world must seem to those who have no home!"

But Miss Archer's thoughts just then, like her eyes, could not travel beyond Nora herself. She had taken off both her own hat and jacket and Helen's, and now, in her long, soft serge dress (made so beautifully that no wonder Mrs. Prin always hurried with sighs to supply her with a wide apron when she went down into the kitchen to do anything for Helen), she was kneeling on the hearth, lighting the fire in a scientific manner, which surprised Miss Archer even more than it amused her.

"I would like every London house to have a supply of real Irish turf," Nora said, as she dropped her hands to watch the burning of the wood. "Now don't tell me it makes a great dust. You English always say that. Don't you know that its dust will keep one turf alight for a whole night, ready to kindle the morning fire? I could have a fire in a minute or two then, without troubling anyone."

"You are troubling no one but yourself now, dear."

"But I need not trouble even myself then, though I like lighting fires very much; I am

used to it. Did I ever tell you how Will Foster and I lighted one or two once, when we went fishing? We took our dinner with us. He had pasties and cake and cider, and I had two huge raw potatoes, which I intended to cook for myself, thinking, I daresay, that Will would cook the fish he caught—which he couldn't well do, because he caught none. As nobody was to know I was with him, we went a long, long way by the river; then we hunted among the trees for a retired spot to dine in, and at last, after wandering for hours and hours, we climbed some fences and reached one beautiful opening on the side of a slope. Here we lighted three fires."

"Why three?"

"Oh! you'll see in a minute. The first was just beginning to flame brilliantly, when a gust of wind took it bodily down the slope, and scattered it in countless flickering atoms. I collected all the remnants, and Will gathered more twigs; and as we had used our turf and paper (though fortunately not our matches) I lighted the next with my handkerchief. It was not a very successful plan, but the *handkerchief* at any rate burnt itself out well, and for a few minutes there was not a bad sort of fire, though it was choking rather. Will didn't

want a third lighted, but I did; so I lighted it with a bit of the brim of my hat, and it was splendid. Then he had to stop laughing, and congratulate me, and help me to cook my potatoes. The cruellest thing of all was that they were not half done when a man came and took us up for trespassing. My one remorseful reflection all the way he took us was, that we had not had our dinner earlier, that we might have had the enjoyment of it to remember in prison—for the man told me we were going straight to prison. How can you laugh, Helen? It was a real tragedy, and far worse for me than for Will, for when we were led handcuffed —well, hardly as you understand the word, perhaps, because your knowledge is only gleaned from books, but my hand tight in Will's—into an Awful Presence, my eyes ached so with their immense stare at it—and the smoke of those fires—that I knew it was Jupiter himself, as I had seen a picture of him on Olympus. It wasn't though, after all. The Awful Presence owned the land on which we had been found forming a colony, and so when he advised me to wash my face, I did so at once in a tremor. Then he filled my pinafore with apples, and Will's hat with nuts, and sent us home in his

gig to Kilver—Will had pretended we both lived at the Vicarage, because he was afraid of grandpa—and told us never again to wander so many miles away from home to trespass, and always to cook our potatoes before we started, unless we wanted to end our days at the tread-mill—which we didn't. Laughing again, Helen? How can you? If we had been transported for seven years then, we shouldn't have been back yet—should we?—for I was quite thirteen."

"But Mr. Foster was grown up."

"Almost; but he never seemed to remember *that* when he came out with me. He is just the same still, I think. Now, Helen, for the nice little supper—I'll make you—both of us, I mean, dear, if you only won't look anxious about that—or anything, but just get into bed and rest. Leave me to put everything away. Isn't it my fault entirely that you are so wearied? I ought to have gone alone to-night."

"If you had," said Helen, with a deep-drawn breath, "I think the suspense of these hours without you would have killed me."

So utterly wearied was Helen, and so soothed by the supper Nora prepared, and by her very presence and voice, that she fell asleep almost as soon as she lay down. So Nora, dreading to

disturb her, sat in the easy bedroom chair which she had herself bought for Helen, and rested there in utter silence—if such deep and anxious thought for Helen could be called rest at all.

It was about two hours past midnight, when Helen started from her pillows and called Nora with a cry of haste and pain.

"My dear, I am here beside you," the girl said, in the pretty, low voice that had grown so soothing and tender. "Were you dreaming?"

"Yes; dreaming," murmured Helen, as the short-lived feverish excitement died out of her eyes, and her breath grew quiet and equal again. "Nora, why were you sitting there—dressed and watching me? You forget yourself. You take no care for yourself. All your anxiety and care is for me. Oh! Nora, when I try to think—what you have been to me through these months, I—I——"

"You remember what you were to me last year," said Nora, gently, "that is all. Now, Helen," she added, with a soft kiss upon the hot lips, "I will read you to sleep again."

But words and voice, for the first time, had no power to soothe to sleep, and Nora laid down her book at last, finding Helen's tired,

wakeful gaze fixed wistfully upon her face.

"Dreaming still?" she asked, smiling as she laid her hand softly on Helen's head.

"Nora," asked Miss Archer, betraying at once how far away her thoughts had been, "is Mr. Foster a member of any of the London clubs?"

"No, Helen. Why?"

"Is—Mr. Poynz?"

"Yes."

A little pause, while Helen tried to win ease and indifference into her voice.

"Which club is it?"

"The Carlton."

"And Mr. Poynz has a title now. He is Lord——"

"Lord Keston, yes." Nora had answered almost absently, because it was so rarely that she let her thoughts touch the time which Helen's words recalled; but the silence which followed her last answer struck her so strangely that she bent and whispered a question very low.

"Helen, why are you thinking of Mr. Poynz to-night?"

"I often think of him," Helen said, with a sudden nervous energy in her weak voice, and a deepening of the feverish red upon her cheeks.

"I cannot help it, Nora. How could anyone who had known him help thinking of him? How, above all, anyone to whom he had been kind as he was to me—for whom he had shown such thought, and such real sympathy in those dull days? I could not help it that he gave me the only sympathy and pleasure I had—until I knew you. I could not help thinking of him then. I cannot help thinking of him now. Such thoughts hurt no one. They were very grateful ones even then, but they are doubly so now, in their deep and calm content. No, my darling, don't cry. Oh! how it breaks my heart to see you cry for me, when I never see you shed tears for all that you yourself have forfeited. My dear, I have given up nothing. I have more at this moment than I ever had before in all my life. As he grew to love you, he made *me*, too, his friend; that is all, my darling. There is no sorrow in the thought. Perhaps at first there may have been just a little, because we—we women are not created differently perhaps, even when no love is to be given us from—one we can love, while we have—so much to give. I—I did not understand it often, but I do now. We may love all that is good, and true, and generous, and such love is good for

us—not harm; and when we look back and see the light it has thrown upon our way—just for a little while—we know that it has helped us on to—the great light coming.—He never knew, he never guessed," she whispered, as Nora, pressing her lips upon the wasted hand, tried in vain to stay her tears. "Long ago, Nora—so long ago—when I was a girl as you are, I had sweet impossible dreams even of my own, and thought that there might come a day when I should have some one to work for me and care for me, and love the home he gave me—for my sake, just as I saw so many women loved and cared for. And perhaps, when this blessing never came to me, I—fretted a little to my own heart, and grew lonely and unthankful. Then his friendship did me good, and made me see—the better side—of all. And so I knew that what I felt for *him* would make me love everyone more, and I let it grow. Then you came. Nora, Nora, why cry for me in these past times, my darling? They are all dear memories to me now. You, knowing nothing of me, believed in me and trusted me. Hush! dear. If, as you say, you have not been deceived in me, you yourself prevented it. At once your love seemed to fill and warm my

heart, Nora. I grew ashamed of its coldness then; I even forgot its craving, and felt I had a friend—not only whom I must love with all my heart, but who loved me too. Did I not see it in every warm, kind glance and word, whether gay or earnest? And is it strange now, Nora, as I lie here and see all my life lying in the past, that you—and he—should be so often in my thoughts; and that I long to see——"

"Oh! no—oh! no!" cried Nora, in real anguish, as she threw her arms round Helen. "Only me, Helen! My dear, my dear, only me! Let me do all! Oh! let me be all! And at last, when you meet him *There*, you will tell him that it was not in cruelty I kept him from you while I am here, but in love! Oh! Helen, Helen, in such deep undying and unchanging love!"

"Nora," whispered Helen, the hectic burning brighter in her cheeks, and her eyes filled with saddest sympathy, "I guessed this. I am very, very grateful. Look up, my darling. I did not ask to see him; I want only you. Dear friend, true, faithful friend, I want only you. But I may feel that he will find a way himself—and now, God's will be done."

CHAPTER VII.

"To worship truly is to love each other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer."

MAKING, each day, one melancholy, weary step, that drear November month passed on. If the gloom and the fogs were but over, Nora thought, Helen might sit up a little, and perhaps would notice what was passing, and lose this far-off yearning look within her patient eyes. What could cause it? It could not now be caused by fear for Dr. Armstrong's entrance, for many days ago they had ceased to look with dread for that. It could not be fear of poverty for them, Nora said, for Helen could see she had no use for the things which went so willingly to keep up the little household. And it could not be that she looked for any other old friend or companion, because she had often said that had not Nora come in to her that day

(when she had been, in her solitude, so gratefully and lovingly thinking of her), she must have been alone, both in health and suffering, all her life. What could it be? Night after night, as Nora sat beside the bed, her lovely watching eyes growing to look so large in her pale face, she would wonder over this. But she could not understand it yet.

All that nervous shrinking from the streets, which had seized Nora since their encountering Dr. Armstrong, was forgotten; for she never thought now of leaving the house. Day and night she was always with Helen; gently—ah, so gently!—smoothing the way for the tired feet into the valley path. She had given up both the other rooms now; not only because the two friends needed no room but this, where they could be together, but because Nora knew they could not pay for more. Still Helen's savings were not exhausted. One by one Nora's rings all went, but the slight white fingers were pretty enough without them; one by one, too, the luxuries Nora had bought for Helen's sitting-room were all given up; but who was there now to miss them?

Sometimes Helen would wistfully touch the plain dark dress with a look which told a pitiful

story of its own, but Nora could easily smile at that now.

"Last time I was in London, Helen," she said one day, in her easy, pretty way, "I remember thinking how hard it would be to choose a dress—if I had been *obliged* to do so, you know, and I was so glad I wasn't obliged. Simply looking at them in the shop windows would have cured anyone, I think. It cured me. Oh, the hours of work and weariness they have seen, Helen! It wearied me even to look at them, and to think how unnecessary all the expense and elaboration was."

"But, my darling, you were always so fond of pretty dresses, only you know now that——"

"I am fond of them now," put in Nora, rather hurriedly; "I am indeed—just as I am fond of pictures. When you get up, Helen, I will show you what I call a pretty dress."

"Mine?" asked Helen, with a smile. "Ah, Nora, I will let you forget to care for them when you are my age, dear."

"It isn't a question of age," said Nora, as she thought of many women she had met in society who considered themselves girls at Helen's age. "But do you know, Helen, I have sometimes really envied—just for the passing minute—

women whose happiness can be complete just *because* they are handsomely dressed. It is such a convenient kind of happiness, isn't it?"

"And an enviable one?" questioned Helen, with the smile which Nora had been tempting. "I forget who it is," she added, thoughtfully, "but some writer says he can easily overlook any present momentary sorrow when he reflects that it is in his power to be happy a thousand years hence. Such a thought as that is happiness indeed, for, if this life were all, oh, how weary we should be!"

* * * * * * *

It was a cheerless rainy night, but the little fire in Helen's room burnt clearly and cheerfully, as usual, under the constant care it had. The doctor had just left the sick-room, and Helen had looked brighter since she had whispered a few parting words to him, while Nora was away for a minute. And now, with this faint brightness of patience and content upon her face, she lay with Nora's hand on hers, as she loved to feel it.

And the girl talked gently to her, wooing her into a little forgetfulness of her constant pain, as Nora sometimes could. Now mentioning grave and happy subjects, and now remind-

ing Helen of pleasant days which they had spent together, recalling them in that tender, wondering way which after-sorrow teaches us. She would talk of their humble dissipations with delight, but she never touched on those gorgeous assemblies and entertainments in which she herself had taken part in the past season. She would smile over their rare excursions by rail or omnibus, but she said no word of her old luxurious drives, of her own ponies, or of that one last beautiful drive on the day Mark went away. She would talk of those little walks of theirs, after lesson hours, in the lighted streets, when they were busy on their trifling housekeeping errands; but she never spoke of any of her old indulgent lavish purchases. She would recall those Summer and Autumn afternoons when Helen's home-coming was such happiness for her, and the tea such a pleasant, restful meal; but she never seemed to recollect her own beautiful house beside the river, and any home-comings there.

As she spoke, Helen fell quietly asleep, for the first time for many weary hours; and then Nora sat—in that great stillness which was growing so natural to her—and listened to the silence as well as the sounds, with the keen and nervous tension which watching gives us, when

we so acutely feel (as if it struck upon our own brain) the vibration of every sound which may disturb the sleeper.

Thus the night had almost passed, when men's raised voices, angry and quarrelsome, seemed to fill the street, and even the house. Nora started to her feet, as if she could have silenced them by the agony of her own fear; and the hand that was not on Helen's went out imploringly, as if the voices *must* be still in pity to her mute, unseen appeal.

Then, looking down, she saw they ceased too late; for Helen's eyes were wide and startled, as if the sleep, which had stayed that wasting fire in her cheeks, and eased the laboured breath, had fled for ever at its rude awaking.

"Listen!"

The faint voice was so clear and calm, so unmoved by any confusion which, from without, had reached the sad little chamber, that Nora, in a new fear which stayed her very breath upon her lips, knelt down and looked into the eyes whose gaze was so far off.

"Helen!—Helen!" she whispered, in untold love and longing, "I am here beside you."

Ay! There beside her, with all the warm

and tender love which had made the sunshine of poor Helen's life, and with the gentle, fond caresses which had always soothed and cheered her—until now.

There beside her, but unnoticed for the first time; while over the patient face, and in the far-off, dying eyes, there broke a smile of greeting.

CHAPTER VIII.

Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds.
Shakespeare's Sonnets.

THE brown monotony of the bog was made dreary indeed by the steady downpour of Autumn rain; yet old Kitty stood looking out upon it from the kitchen window at Traveere, when she might have looked into the turf fire, glowing frankly and cheerily in the open grate behind her. It was that quiet hour of the afternoon when the day's active work is done, and it is too near tea-time to begin evening tasks. The kettle hung over the fire, ready for Kitty's solitary tea; but no cup and saucer were set, and the thin cake of oaten meal, tilted before the fire on an iron tray, was burning slowly, as no good Irish housekeeper can bear to see her "meal-cake" burn. But then truly

Kitty did not see it, for her eyes—dimmed now by something more than age—saw only the wet, brown scene beyond the little blurred panes of the new window.

"Rainin', rainin'; iver an' alwis rainin!" she muttered, rubbing one spot in the glass angrily with her closed fist. "Long afore wan power's o'er the nixt begins. It 'ud be this wither they'll be havin' in Purgory, I'm bound, power sowls, wid niver a dthry clo' to put on too. An' the bairn mebbe out in the cowld an' wit, an' wid the face of hurr that whitesome, loike a new-led egg; yit, furr the purthisomeness of hurr, it's in a goulden chart she mit be ridin', an' a will-to-do husban' arrm in arrm wid her, no liss. Howly Sint Pathrick! now who be's comin' here the day?"

For a moment the old woman's face had lighted up with expectation, as she pressed it to the glass; but in the next she had recognised the small, well-cloaked figure under the dripping umbrella.

"An' sorra a wan ilse," she muttered, as she opened the door to Miss Pennington.

"No—no news," said Celia, in haste to say it as soon as she met Kitty. "No news; but one cannot always stay in the house, even in snch

weather as this. So I came to ask you how you are. Mr. Foster is talking with Breen, and will come in for me presently. What a nice fire!".

"An' much usesomeness it be's to kape a dacent bit o' fire now at all," grumbled Kitty, as she took Celia's cloak from her, "an' that bairn niver to set hurr fit back on the sod o' ould Ireland agin at all to see it! It's aisy enough to starrve in thim places beyant the say; an' it's starrvin' she'll be the day, an' wit as a wave, glory to God!"

"Are you better yourself, Kitty?" inquired Celia, in her sedate, thoughtful way; but flinching a little from that other subject.

"I be's will enough in meself, Miss Pinnington; it be's me fit achin' frum the standin' of me, lookin' out an' niver seein' that blissed cheeld. Dade, on this day they be achin' that sharrpsomely that I don' know I've anny fit on me at all."

"Then papa's recipe didn't cure your feet, Kitty?"

"Oh, the resate!" returned Kitty, with a prompt and generous air of exoneration of all blame from the sender of it, "is will enough. It cured 'em quoite a good deal, me dear; but

still"—honestly—"not much, at all. Now, ye must sit here a bit, sure, whither the gintleman comes furr ye or not. It'll be weeks, an' days, an' hours sin ye iver be here agin, mebbe."

"Yes, we go to-morrow." Celia was sitting beside the fire, gazing into it; and did not raise her eyes to meet Kitty's shrewd, pleased glance.

"An' ye'll some o' ye foind me bairn this toime?"

"I wish—oh, how I wish we could!"

"Ye're missin' hurr yerself," remarked Kitty, looking down upon the girl's grave face and listless attitude. "I've not'ced it iver sin' ye come back—all ov ye, too. Folks wander over it now an' thin, sayin' sich nonsinse 'bout Miss Nora bein' ongratyful to ye! *She*, that 'ud nurrse up a broken ligged cat, loike its own mither; an' it's meself that's sin her do it."

"Does anyone say she is ungrateful, Kitty?" asked Celia, looking up in surprise. "I never heard any one here utter a word against Nora, even through all this mystery of her disappearance."

"Thin ye wurr locky," observed Kitty,

briefly; "an' it wurrnt anny o' the docthor's frinds ye've bin discoorsin'."

"No; I don't want ever to talk to any of Dr. Armstrong's friends again."

"Ye havent't hurrd o' him yit, I s'pose?" inquired Kitty, presently; evidently speaking against her will, as she put aside her burnt cake. "What wurr the last ye hurrd?"

"I have never seen him," said Celia, speaking heavily, "since the night we—lost Nora. But afterwards, you know, when Mr. Poynz had at last tracked out that house to which Hannah had driven with Nora on the Saturday before she went away—Mr. Poynz, when he came back, kept Hannah for the service, you know, and I think they must have gone all over London to seek that house—they found that a gentleman had taken the room only that very morning, calling himself Harris, and had never returned after the lady (that was Nora) had driven away with her maid. Mr. Poynz suspected how it was, and took the mistress of the house (who had let the room to this Mr. Harris) with him until he could show Dr. Armstrong to her; and—yes, *he* was the Mr. Harris who had engaged the apartments, and he was the only gentleman who had been to the house at all.

Since then I have never seen Dr. Armstrong."

"But sure the Inglish gintleman towld him this?"

"Yes," said Celia, very low. "I believe—I have heard that there was a terrible scene between them; but what could be done? As he said (Dr. Armstrong, I mean), Nora had left us of her own accord, and our letters proved it. He had not seen her since she had driven from him with her maid, after a business interview, he said, which she had chosen to conduct in private at his lodgings, to which she had voluntarily come. And he had no intention at all of explaining more fully. No one could make him do so, you know, and so——We know nothing still, whether he does or not."

"Ye moight will say ye hadn't annythin frish to till me," grumbled Kitty, throwing a turf into the hollow of the fire. "Sure, I've hurrd all this afore. Misther Dyle towld me that, an' mower, no liss. But it's moighty little, me dear. Whurr's the rason of hurr goin' at all at all?"

"Ah, where indeed?" sighed Celia, despondingly. "Even Mr. Doyle can make no guess. She wrote to him, as you know, and resigned her wealth; because, according to a letter of

her grandfather's, she had forfeited it. But Mr. Doyle says she could not have known she was obliged to relinquish it, if Dr. Armstrong had not told her; and he says that looks suspicious. And so he is keeping the money in his own hands, until he has positive proof that she has lost her right to it."

"An' whoile he's kapin' it, she's nawn to spind on hurrself, poor widgeon; an' she's all throughother thurr in Ingland, I'll warnt. She wurr fit furr it when she wint away frum here—she'd niver had anny, an' she didn't want it—but ye spyled hurr afore ye left hurr 'thout mawney over thurr. An' here I've mawney, an' the bit an' sup in plinty, an' can't sind hurr nuthin'."

"How willingly we would any of us send to her if we could," said Celia, earnestly.

"It's quoite, quoite sure y'are," said Kitty, taking a worn letter from the bosom of her dress, "that thur's no place written here fur us to sind hurr."

This was an old familiar speech of Kitty's now, and Celia never came to Traveere without being prepared for it; but there was no evidence of this being the fifteenth time she had

read the letter slowly over to the old woman, who sat close to her, leaning forward and devouring each of Nora's few loving, sorrowful words of good-bye, as they fell a little brokenly from Celia's lips.

"Thur's nuthin' she's furgotten in it," said Kitty, rubbing her sleeve clumsily across her eyes, as she put the worn paper back, with hard, brown fingers, which yet were delicate and careful then, "ivery animal's in hurr head, ye see, an' Breen, an'——"

"Kitty," put in Celia, very glad to interrupt the heavy, unusual sobs, "I hear Mr. Foster's step. Will you open the door to him?"

"I'll open the dower," muttered Kitty, as she rose, "but if he be's loike he wurr last toime he come I'll not know him if he be's thurr his viry silf at all. An' thur's Breen, too, comin' up afther him," the old woman went on, as she passed the window. "He's iver an' alwis 'trudin' 'bout in here now. *Cheerin' me*, he calls it, the big idget, whin I be's so cheerifle, mirover."

Will Foster lingered for many minutes beside Kitty's fire, evidently detained by the motive which in Breen had excited her contempt; then Celia found that the rain had abated, and so

donned her waterproof and told Will she was ready.

They had walked quite half-way across the bog before Will Foster volunteered a word to his companion; but she was growing used now to these uncharacteristic moods of silent depression, which broke the restless excitement in which he had lived ever since Nora's disappearance. Constantly was he forming a new plan, or projecting a fresh journey, and when either had failed, or been relinquished in its design, he would subside into utter and speechless despondency—for a few hours.

"I seem to have been here doing nothing for years," he said, at last, startling Celia by his unceremonious rupture of the silence. "How long is it since I came, Celia?"

"Not two days," she answered, in her gentle way. "And you would not have been doing nothing, if there had been anything you could do—I know that, Will."

"You always think the best of me," he said, his inherent and pleasant politeness toning down his excitement a little, as it always could. "And it is no wonder I came, is it? I'm sure when I heard, on Sunday morning, that Mrs. Pennington had decided to go to Brighton for a change,

and to take you, I determined at once to come and fetch her—and you; and I could hardly get through my service, I was so glad. But then," added poor Will, frankly, "you see it is a long time since I've been able to get through a service quite properly, without letting my thoughts wander to disappointments and troubles, and doubts as to what it would be best to do next. Do you know, Celia, on the first Sunday of all, I began to perform the service in my great-coat."

"Mother wants a change sadly; don't you think so?" asked Celia, after a little pause—for she had so often received these confidences of Will's.—"We are all very anxious about her, but papa says Brighton air thoroughly renovated her once before—after my little brother died, but I don't remember that. It seems a long way for us to go, but I fancy the very consciousness of being in England will soothe mamma. She has fretted terribly since we left London."

"And you yourself, Celia?" inquired young Foster, understanding all she shrank from saying. "Are you glad to go?"

"Yes. In England I shall not seem so very far away from Nora—I believe not, at least—

for I think she is there. And, besides the benefit for mamma, I shall hear what you are doing, without such a long delay. And when you have news, I shall know it at once."

"*My* mother is in Brighton now," said Will, utterly unaware of the flitting blushes on Celia's sad little face, "and I shall be there very often. You don't know, Celia, how delighted I am to think of seeing you whenever I go—of course chiefly because you need the change, but a good deal for my own sake, too. I have no one now to discuss my plans with, and to help me with suggestions for my search. As for Poynz, he is quite changed, and when I *do* manage to see him for a few minutes, I somehow—there's something about him that stops my worrying him with any proposals or fears (or even hopes) of mine."

"You mean because he has done everything that could be done?" asked Celia, in her gentle, practical way. "Advertised, and employed detectives, and searched, and examined, and made all the efforts you and Mr. Doyle have told us of?"

"I did not exactly mean that," explained Will, honestly. "I meant because in the presence of his pain and suspense, anyone else's—

however great and hard to bear—must seem less; and anyone else's grief would seem like an intrusion in presence of his immense, silent agony. Oh! Celia, the last time I saw him, do you know I felt afraid to be alone with him? It sounds absurd, I know, but it is the simple truth; for I thought, when I looked at his face, that this great suffering, about which he is so silent, was too much for any man to bear, and that it would kill him."

"Does he look so ill?" questioned Celia, sorrowfully.

"I don't know that that is it exactly; but he looks quite changed—locked up in himself, as it were, and stern—even fierce, I think. Yet sometimes a longing comes into his eyes, as gentle and wistful as a girl's."

"And he never rests in this sad search, I suppose?"

"Never; he is always pursuing it, and with a system, too, as I never can. Yet often even when he is forming or following some intricate plan, his thoughts seem suddenly to go off far beyond his control. I sometimes see that they are miles away from me while I am speaking to him."

"That is not at all like what he used to be,"

said Celia. "I remember he was always, in his coolest moments, so quick to enter into whatever was told or asked him."

"And somehow, with it all, he seems to be that still," the young curate went on, reflectively. "It was only yesterday—he had come down to Heaton for one night, and was walking with me past the church—he talked to me most kindly about my own prospects, and he told me —it was a strange thing to tell me, Celia, but I don't think it will be any betrayal of trust to repeat it to you—he told me rather a strange intention of his about the Heaton living. He said he had always intended it for me, but now he had changed his mind, and he had perfect confidence in my not resenting the change. If *you* married a clergyman, he said, the Heaton living was to be a gift for your husband, for Nora's sake, whose friend you were—you are, I mean. He says he feels sure you will marry a clergyman eventually, because you are so exactly what a young rector's wife should be—so he said."

"Oh, Will, I hope he will not think of that. I hope he will give it to you," faltered Celia, her face burning hotly.

"No, he will not, and he is quite right," young

Foster answered, generously. "His decision is best. But then it is only to be so, I should fancy, if he marries Nora. He says his decision is selfish, because it is to please Nora, by settling her dear little friend near her; but that could not be the case if she does not marry him."

"He will never marry anyone else," said Celia, with the quietness of utter conviction.

"Do you feel so sure? But you know that they are not really engaged, don't you, Celia—don't you?"

"Why need you think of that?" asked Celia, gently. "Nothing seems to matter to me now, except the finding of Nora."

"Yet more seems to matter terribly to me," said Will, in his frank, prompt way, "and I cannot even yet look at the possibility of her marrying some one else. Oh, Celia, if I could but find her!"

"Celia," he asked, presently, with one of his swift changes of mood, "shall you be ready to leave to-morrow?"

"Yes, we are all ready now."

"How delightful it will be to have you! And, Celia," he added, trying in his simple kindness to cheer her a little, "when you marry the lucky parson who is to have the Heaton Rectory,

won't you try to persuade him to retain me as his curate? If Nora" (with a little gulp) "is to miss you so immensely in that splendid home of Keston's, just think how solitary I shall feel, losing her, *and* you, *and* my old parish."

"I shall never marry at all, Will."

"My dear girl," he said, in his genial, brotherly way, "such a notion carries absurdity written on the face of it. You will marry, of course; and marry a clergyman too, I hope, for Nora's sake as well as yours—and his. There, that wish surely ought to have double weight from me, because, if you don't wed the parson, I—personally—shall reap the benefit."

"How?"

"In that case Keston intends to give me the living."

"If I don't marry?"

"If you don't marry a parson."

"Put down the umbrella, Will; you hold it so low I can scarcely breathe."

CHAPTER IX.

"Then, when we stood in the chamber, and knew not the words we were saying."

UTTER solitude had never held such silence and loneliness for Nora as that which wrapped her as she sat beside the dead; in that little room which had been home to her for so long, and in which it was so sadly strange to sit with motionless hands and silent lips; after those constant tasks and that constant companionship of the time which was gone for ever now. Could it really have been that sometimes she had felt lonely, even through those days and nights when Helen lay here, needing her, and loving her? Ah! could it be possible? In her isolation now, and in that terrible hush of sorrow and loneliness, Nora could only look back longingly to those times, dreamily and vaguely

envying her old self, because there had been life and sound about her then, and a warm and living glance met hers.

But now the room was filled with cold, and awe, and silence; and, chilled and bewildered, Nora sat in this new loneliness, wondering—when any stray sound reached her from the street or from the house—how it *could* be that other lives were passing as usual; that duties were being performed, and pleasures taken, just as if the world were still what it was long ago—when she remembered having duties to perform and pleasures to enjoy, even herself. But, then, it was so long ago, and the world was so different. This whole world was filled with gloom, and a great awful stillness. What could it mean, when these passing voices broke it, as if they could not know of this dreamy whiteness which covered the still features and the dead smile! As if they did not know that it was all over now—that life was gone, and only death was left.

With her tired hands clasped in her lap, but her head raised in the intensity of these new feverish thoughts which swayed her without will of hers—as thoughts often do in such keen anguish—Nora sat as she had done through all

the thirty hours since Helen's death. Now and then the mistress of the house, who had learned to love the girl through her long, untiring, and uncomplaining attendance on Miss Archer, came softly into the room and tried to tempt her away. She had put a nice little fire in the sitting-room, she said, because her lodger was out, and this chamber was cold as a well. Would not a little breakfast do her good? "My dear," she said at last, roused to real terror by Nora's changed voice when she thanked her, and by that wild, bewildered gaze of the dark, puzzled eyes, "if you go on like this, we shall soon have you lying there too. I'm sure nobody would know you as it is, and I shall have this laid at my door."

"I will come," said Nora, rising wearily when Mrs. Prin pleaded so, in the morning of this second day; "I will take what you give me. You have been very kind to us both; I will not bring you more trouble if I can help it."

Then Mrs. Prin started forward in a hurry, hearing that tired sob. But Nora's eyes were still quite dry in their pained perplexity, and she only said she had a headache—rather a giddy headache—when the woman questioned her so anxiously.

"I don't think I will go away from here," she said, sinking back upon her seat. "The room moves with me when I move. I am better here. Don't you know how soon they will take her from me, and then I can never come back to her. No; let me stay now."

So Mrs. Prin left her once more, in that great stillness of pain and bewilderment; and when, an hour afterwards (with a sensation of hope and excitement which was strange to her) she opened the folding-doors between this room and the sitting-room, she found Nora still sitting motionless, beside the cold, covered face which could not brighten now to meet the yearning, clinging gaze.

"Miss Archer," she said, softly—for Helen had let it be believed here that they were sisters—"will you come here? This room is at your service, and you are wanted."

Nora had been summoned to more than one hard and bitter conference through these two days; and now she rose mechanically, and almost as if in a dream, to meet one more.

"I have such a strange headache," she said, wearily, as she came towards the open doors, with her hand upon her forehead. "I never re-

member my head aching so before—perhaps because I am not used to——"

The words died on her white unsteady lips, and she staggered a little as she stood; for she had seen the familiar figure of her landlady retire, and some one else come towards her —some one whom in that first moment she scarcely knew, yet whose approach made her heart throb with pain, and her limbs lose their failing strength.

"Nora, Nora, my beloved!"

Such a call it was, from heart to heart, though the words were but a whisper, as Mark took her in his arms, and held her as if he never again could let her go. And yet so gently, too; for this fragile girl was not the happy, wilful girl whom he had left in such health and beauty, on that happy Summer day when he had told her how he loved her. Was *this* the gay, bewitching beauty of the past season—the girl even in whose *presence* sorrow seemed to break into singing, and no face could wear this pain?

Ah, it was well that Mark should lay her head upon his breast while these thoughts passed like arrows through his heart; for even *her* anguish must have grown and deepened if she could have looked on his.

"Oh, child—oh, love!" he whispered, from his full heart. "How I have sought you! But that misery is all passed now. You are here within my arms—safe at last—my own, and in my care for ever."

At first his words had not seemed to reach her, but now she lifted her head and moved gently from him, holding the foot-rail of the bed for support, as she turned and looked down upon the still form lying there.

"I have no other room," she said then, very low. "Please leave me—with her. It has been so silent here, and your voice is—full of trouble."

For a few minutes he stood beside her, looking down wonderingly and tenderly, as she did, on the motionless figure to which, when he had seen it last, Nora had hastened with such loving eagerness.

"For her," he whispered, "the rest has come now, Nora." And at his words—the first she had heard tenderly spoken of Helen—the long frozen tears found vent, and, bowing her head upon her hands, she sobbed as if her heart were breaking in its anguish.

Quietly and tenderly he soothed her, leading her the while into the little unoccupied sitting-

room which she and Helen used to call their own; and at last the sobs grew faint and far between, and she looked up to meet Mark's gaze of love and sorrow. Then, all at once, remembrance came back. She rose from the seat into which he had put her, and stood quite still beside the little fire, leaning with her clasped hands on the chimney-piece, and looking down among the glowing coals, with a very fever in her sorrowful dark eyes.

"I have a headache," she said, moving one hand slowly to the back of her head, and then clasping both again; "and it made me bewildered at first. I hardly knew—what I was doing, or who—you were. Now, I remember. I"—with one swift glance at the closed doors—"would like to go back. I feel stronger there, I think. She understands, and you—never can."

"I understand," he said, and could not help the tone betraying that concentrated passion whose power frightened even himself now in her presence. "I understand, but I will let that rest until I meet him. Now I can only feel how I have found you, my love, my treasure—to be guarded now and cherished with such care—such care, my poor, pale love——"

"Mark!" The whisper was full of a new, acute pain, for his words had been broken by a sob, terrible to hear from him in his strength. "Mark, are *you*—have you been suffering, too?"

"Suffering!" He echoed the word, meeting her gaze; and then she saw the havoc these months had made in the brave, steadfast face. "But I am not going to tell you of that, Nora. I have found you now, and suffering is over for us both, my beloved."

"You have been ill," she said, low and drearily; while she stood opposite him, with her sad eyes cleaving to his face.

"If I had been ill ever since we parted, Nora, this would be recovery—to hold your hand in mine, my Sweet, and know that now no power on earth can part us."

"I remember," she said, looking slowly and timidly around her. "It was not here we parted. I remember. They told us that to-morrow a new scene of things might open, and it did. It was all different then. I tried not to think of you. Helen guessed how I tried, for I saw how sorry she was for me. She knew it was hard. But she was—always good. So patient, that I—tried to be patient too. Oh, Mark!"—with a sudden shivering terror—"why

did you come? I have so prayed that, whoever found me, *you* never should. I am not strong —with you. I am afraid—of myself. And—and—oh, how dreary the loneliness will be—after!"

"There is nothing to come after, Nora," he gently said, "except a happy life for us two together. All separation is over now, my Sweet. I will not to-day ask you why you imposed it upon me, or rather allowed another to do so, for this day I have no word to say except in gratitude for our reunion. Now I will see that kind doctor who, at Miss Archer's dying request, sent me your address. Then will you be ready to come, my darling?"

"Ready—to come!"

She repeated the words vaguely and dreamily, but their very utterance brought back all the knowledge which his sudden presence had scattered.

"I cannot come," she said, her tones very quiet in the intensity of her emotion. "I was afraid you would find me, because you did once before. But it was so different then, I was so glad you found me, oh! so glad!—now it has been my one great fear."

Standing there, in her plain dark dress, and

with her beautiful hair all knotted loosely from her face, as if its weight had troubled her, she was so unlike the merry Nora of old times, that it was little wonder Mark felt the words unlike her too, as he drew her to him with such compassionate and protecting gentleness.

"My love, how soon can you be ready to come? That is all I want to know. I can only afford to be away from you for a very few minutes."

"I cannot come—even to you. Oh! Mark, in pity do not ask me."

"I do not ask you," he said, the lines deepening in his rugged face, as he tried to hide the fear for her which made his voice so unsteady, "I only wait to take you. I can go to the doctor another time. I need not leave here, even for a few minutes, without you. I feel as if I could never let you leave my sight again, my beloved."

"I cannot go, Mark. You must leave me," she cried, in a tone which he had never heard before, through all his knowledge of her. "I have a promise to keep—a—vow. Mark, you are true and honourable, you cannot tempt me —to break it."

"Truth and honour!" he repeated, wrathfully,

as, looking on the young face, beautiful even in the whiteness of great pain, he recalled the radiant smile and happy glance which had belonged to it. "Truth and honour had no place in the compelling of such promise; and by Heaven——"

"Oh! hush!" she cried, pointing with both her clasped hands to the closed doors between them and the dead.

"Nora," he whispered, catching the weak, raised fingers in his own, and trying, for her sake, to restrain his great agitation, "all promises that stand between yourself and me must be broken, for the sake of that very truth and honour of which you remind me. When you speak of another promise, do you forget that our first was given to each other, and that it made us husband and wife in the sight of Heaven? Would you not hold *that* promise sacred, Nora?"

"I do," she said. "All my life will be better for that promise, though it can only be kept in my own heart."

"Nora," he cried, passionately, "you know how I love you—life and love seem one to me; I could not disentangle them with all my strength; even you, who have all other

power over me, could not tear those two apart for me—and you love me too. Can I read you so truly, Sweet, and not know that you would love me ever, just as you did when you made me that promise which you must keep before all others?"

"Not before this, for the secret is—not mine. Oh, Mark, be pitiful! Would you, who love me, be the one to tempt me to forget my truth and pity?"

"No, I would make you remember them," he said, growing stern in his agony. "What other man has any right to wring a promise from you? What man on earth has any right to steal my wife's confidence and peace, as well as her trust in me? Do you think I do not know who has done it, Nora? And he shall answer this with his life, for he has done worse to me than take my own——"

His hot, passionate words died under her sad gaze. What but caressing gentleness could live in the presence of her great, quiet sorrow?

"My love," he whispered, "give me that burden which is killing you. Who, except myself, should bear everything for you? I will not ask you now to tell me the secret whose keeping is so hard. When you have rested, Sweet,

and we have wooed the old brilliance back to these sad eyes, and the soft rose-tint to the white cheeks, then you will see that my hands and heart are strong; and you will lay your burden there—the last which you shall ever bear alone, my cherished one."

"I dare not," she said, drawing gently back from his caresses. "I never can be your—your —I never can be—anything to you again. I—— Oh, my head aches so!"

"You want rest, my love, and I will give it you. You shall have old friends and dear faces about you, as well as my constant care, and love, and cherishing."

"Mark," she said, in the soft, hushed tones which she had used throughout, but with a new, weary steadfastness, "you said you would bear a burden for my sake. I am giving it to you now. It is cruel to do so, but I would not if I could help it. I never appealed to you before as I do now. I never entreated you before as I do now. Oh! Mark, the burden that I have to give you is—to leave me here alone."

For a few moments it seemed as if his passion rose beyond control, and, with rapid nervous fingers, raised involuntarily to his throat, he grasped his collar there, as if it choked him.

But one gentle, pleading touch of hers upon his arm, melted the strong passion back again into the infinite tenderness from which it had sprung; and, remembering her weakness while still he read the strength of her resolve, he took her hands once more within his own, and even smiled while he told her they would talk of this another time.

"Even to you," she said, for she had seen this strong brief struggle, "I have brought only trouble. But you will forget in time. I hope so, Mark; only—it is so hard to forget, isn't it? I have so often—oh, so often and often—tried, and yet memory grows stronger every day, instead of weaker; and those old days come back and haunt me as well as—the pain of—these. That is what makes my head ache so. But when I rest, like Helen——What is it?" she whispered, slowly, moving again from him, and pressing the back of her head with her hand, as he tried to stay her pitiful words. "Did I say what you did not like? I—forget. If you knew—if you could feel just for one moment this pain—in my head, you—would understand."

"My darling, I can understand. Do I not feel every pain that hurts you? But you shall

soon win back the old health, and the old bright spirits too, my own beloved. In a few minutes," he added, changing his tone with an effort, "we must start. I shall bring a carriage, Nora, darling, in which you can know no fatigue; and you will meet an old kind friend, who will nurse you for me, until I can take you abroad—my own, for ever."

"It is—impossible."

She was shrinking from his very gaze now, and leaning for real support against the chimney-piece.

"It is impossible. I shall stay with Helen. She was so good to me; so patient with me; and I must not see them again, or—or listen to you. Oh, Mark! if you really love me, leave me here. I—can bear it here."

"You would bear anything which you thought just," said Mark, with intense earnestness; "but *I* am to judge for you now. If *you* can have forgotten that you belonged to me, my darling, *I* am not likely to forget it too; and even your entreaties (though it breaks my heart to refuse them) cannot move me in this. I will do what I feel best for you, my precious child. It is all in selfishness, I know; but you will forgive the selfishness, for what would my

life be worth to me without you—who saved that life for me? Nora, my own beloved, do you not know that to speak of our ever parting again is simply madness."

"Madness?" she questioned, looking into his face almost wildly, as her great courage fought with her great longing for his help and protection. "I have thought that before. I have thought sometimes that perhaps it was—*that.* And I thought it might be better so, because I should not know——What made you start? It is strange to see you start, Mark. Did I vex you? I never used to vex you. I always, always knew *you* were not worried by things I said, even when others were, long ago. I never was afraid of saying to you whatever was in my thoughts. It always seemed different talking to you—and to others. I—don't know why."

"My darling, my own darling!" he whispered, low and brokenly; but could say no other word.

"But I think that then, when you started, I must have been talking to myself. I did it one day—to-day I think it was—and it frightened me. It was in there, and the room was so quiet, till—till I turned and spoke to Helen—

quite aloud—and laughing, too, I think. But she—she never turned to me, or smiled, or—— Oh, take me in to her again! It is still and peaceful there, and she stops this pain—a little."

"I will take care of Helen," he whispered, his chest heaving in a new fear, "and you shall come back to her. But I must take you now."

"Mark," she said, her low words less broken, while he soothed her with such tenderness, "I am not going. I cannot go. You will leave me, please. Perhaps when you are gone, and I sit quite still again—quite, quite still—my headache will be better. You have had headaches, haven't you? I have had them sometimes, but I never noticed before how hard it was to remember exactly, and to say what I must say, and to—to pain you. If the pain were gone I could say it better perhaps. That we two must never meet again—never—or, if we do, it must be like—other strangers. Oh, Mark, make it easier."

"All right, my Sweet," he said, folding his arms about her, aud losing every thought now but that of her bodily pain. "Where is your

hat? I have plenty of warm cloaks. Stay! I will ring."

"Mark, oh, *won't* you listen to me?" she cried, staying his hand. "It cannot be. I have taken —an oath."

"If you had taken forty thousand, love, it would make no shade of difference."

"And promised," she went on, wondering mistily over the concentrated haste and fear and anger in the tone which was yet so gentle to her, "that I would never listen if you—— Where were we then? I forget sometimes. But there was music, and I knew you were going away. I—I heard it in the music, and I knew my Summer was over. You said so—long afterwards; when they told me you were far away—beyond the bells. I knew it was true. To-morrow, you said—to-morrow a new scene of things might open. You said it all the time, while I cried *good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!* And you never heard, and the bells laughed; and Nuel said you were beyond them. But, Mark"—in a low quick whisper, freighted with bravery once more—"you may never again say you love me. The world is very great and wide, and you may say it to anyone but me—*anyone* but me; and I may not listen. But I

shall hear only you. I heard it yesterday—no, not yesterday—when Helen and I stood listening in the street. Helen said it was a band playing *Zampa;* but I knew—I heard—— Hark! It is Helen calling me. She"—in a low, faint whisper, as her clasped hands were pressed upon her forehead—"has headaches too. She told me of them this morning. She said they were like fire—here—behind her eyes. And—Mark, is it you? No—no, not Mark; that—that other name—what is it? No, don't say it. I cannot bear it. Be only *Mark* to me—for this little time. But you must not stay. I will keep that promise—if I die. And you will forgive me, because I love you so; and because my head aches; and—oh! Helen——"

The low miserable cry of utter bewilderment was hushed upon Mark's breast; but there was no need of his loving words to quiet her, for thought and sight and memory were gone.

CHAPTER X.

Was it not Fate (whose name is also Sorrow)?
POE.

A SLOW awakening, into a wide, dim, unknown land of mist and cloud, from which weird and shadowy forms came slowly forward; changing and growing as they moved nearer and nearer, before a forest which was flaming in the distance. And at last pressing upon and deadening once more the faint senses which had been struggling back to life. Then another wakening, into a land less misty and obscure; where the snow lay white and undisturbed, and was falling too, far off among those shadowy forms, which were growing less wild and imperfect in the glow of sunset. No, it was not sunset. It was the moon, shining there across

the snow, while the stars sprang from it, one by one. No, there was no moon, and the snow was melting, and the sky was coming down and closing in, and—— Nora's fingers rested from their feeble groping. It was growing clear to her now, and faintly and slowly her eyes received the tranquil scene as it was, for the first time for many a weary, anxious week. Instead of the burning forest, the setting sun, or rising moon, a red fire glowed; and where the stars had shone only two wax candles flamed. The clouds had all dissolved, and the grey fire-lit walls were standing still at last, and slowly forming pictures to the troubled, unsteady eyes; while their soft tints were broken here and there—yet made more soothing still—by falling colourless curtains. The snow felt soft and smooth, but very solid, under her feeble fingers; and the forms which had been so varying and transitory, grew definite and very still. Except the dancing of the fire-flame, how very still it all was! So still that Nora knew it must be a dream, and that those two silent figures must be motionless until the scene had all melted, and she awoke to—to——

But *memory* had not awakened with the awakening of the fevered eyes, and only they

could form distinct mute figures from the fading chaos. How many were there? A great many —only a few—no, only one—yet more than one. One in the firelight far away, and another nearer to her—close to her—utterly still and silent. What were these motionless figures of her dream, and when would they melt? The forms far off would melt too presently, when Nora awoke to—to—— No, it was all dark, and when she groped feebly there, a pain came back to her which she could remember long ago; and the darkness gathered close about her once again and shut out all.

Then there came another awakening, and this time there was a strange weak shrinking in Nora's gaze around the pretty silent chamber; for she was faintly conscious now that this dream was fairer far than could be the awaking. Slowly—very slowly—the scene grew clear to her, though with the dreamy consciousness that this was not all; that there was a world of dim and shadowy imagery moving beyond, which presently would blot it out. She had never seen this room before, with its white drapery, and those mellow landscapes which the golden light within the room touched and warmed so prettily. She had never seen that old serene face beside

the fire, with placid eyes so often turned upon herself, and with curious hanging muslin on her wavy thick grey hair. She had never seen—stay! she *had* seen some time—somewhere—the other still, calm form the room contained. Even though the eyes were closed, she knew the grave, pale face, and the fair hair that lay so smoothly under the soft lace cap. Where had it been? But while it was impossible for memory to awake, it was hard even for thought to do so; and so, though Nora had a vague and dreamy consciousness that she knew this gentle face quite well, and that it recalled in some dim way, pictures and flowers and a very far-off memory of sadness and misery—and was it Rachael or Micky?—she let the thought die exhausted, while her eyes were still fixed upon the sleeping face. For how long they had been fixed there in this peaceful dream, Nora did not know, when, very quietly, the lady, who had been sitting so still beside the bed, rose and stood for a few moments at a little table which was placed near her easy chair. Nora saw her pour some medicine from a bottle into a glass, and even in this pleasant tranquil dream, Nora knew the draught was for her, and made a feeble, futile effort to rise and take it. But

there was no strength for that, and her head had not left its pillow when this gentle, patient looking lady (whose face she remembered and yet could not remember) had put the glass to her lips. With a feeble attempt to thank her, Nora looked earnestly up into her eyes; and suddenly the languid gaze was riveted, in a kind of shrinking childish terror which was new in every way to Nora, but which, in her great weakness now, made her lie and tremble like a panic-stricken child. Then, quite noiselessly, the grey-haired nurse came up, behind the lady who with this weird direct gaze held the glass to Nora; and, by a sign, the old woman bade the girl take it and say nothing. So, still with the wondering question in her great hollow eyes, she drank the medicine, and tried to smile her thanks. But there was no vestige of a smile upon her unsteady parted lips, and her eyes grew wider and more fevered.

"Hush!" whispered the nurse, below her breath, just as if Nora had spoken, "do not notice it, my dear. She will wake presently; but if we wake her it may be dangerous. Hush! close your eyes."

In her pitiful weakness, Nora obeyed without understanding; and while she lay thus, resting the sight which alone had awakened, memory slowly gave back a little of the past. She knew now where she had seen this patient-looking, fair-haired lady. It was among the flowers where she had found Micky, and among the pictures at which they had looked together; and it was in a peaceful, sheltered spot, where everything was silent and fragrant and dim; and where she had stood with her while some one else——

A pain like a stab shot through Nora's heart, and her eyes were opened with a startled feverish haste. Yes, it was Miss Giffard. Nora remembered it all now. The cottage in the park; the shadowy path among the yews; Micky at work among the verbenas; the paintings; the gentle words and handclasp of the sad-looking lady; and then——

"My dear," whispered the old nurse in a timid, and even troubled voice, as she came up to Nora on the opposite side the bed, and bent her head to the pillows, "don't look so frightened. She will awake presently, and never know what she has done. It was right for you to

have the medicine, so I let her give it. I saw what she was going to do, and I let her. She would be troubled, and ill perhaps, if we woke her. Take no notice, my dear. See how calm she sits. What need for you to look so terrified?"

Ah! what need indeed? Miss Giffard sat utterly motionless in her sleep, and now the lids had fallen over that vague, fixed gaze, and her hands were folded placidly in her lap. No, no need for fear. But something else was awakened now in Nora's mind, and these words (which, simple as they were, had been the first to break the silence of that long struggle with memory) seemed to make her even more weak and childish than she had felt in that long dream of hers; and she looked one moment into the old nurse's kindly face, and then burst into a feeble, tremulous fit of crying.

"Never mind, my dear," the old woman whispered, soothingly stroking the girl's wan, white cheeks; "don't try to stop the tears; let them come. Tears are healthy physic for a sick soul. Let them come, my dear. They will not wake my mistress; and they sound girlish and natural, and do even *me* good after this terrible time when you didn't know tears

from laughter, and suffered too much to know what your trouble was. Cry on, dear. This is better to see than—what has passed."

CHAPTER XI.

"Love lies deeper than all words.
And not the spoken but the speechless love
Waits answer ere I rise and go my way."

HEALTH and strength were creeping slowly, slowly back. The agony of physical suffering was gone, and there was nothing to struggle with now but a great absorbing languor. This languor was even yet a mystery to Nora herself, and on this very day—when, for the first time, she had been allowed to go beyond the garden-gate—she was trying vainly to comprehend it.

"I should have thought," she said, pushing the short, clustering hair from her temples, and then holding her thin white hand to the light, as if she felt that it must be transparent, "that it would have taken years of sickness to make

me feel as I do. Oh, Celia, I am so ashamed to be such a trouble, and such a burden, and such an expense. And I have no right to be here; and but for your real kindness——"

"You ought to be quite tired of saying that sort of thing now, Nora," observed Miss Pennington, in her gentle, matter-of-fact way; and trying to lose the fear with which she always now met Nora's eyes. "Everything else tires you, and I'm sure that very unnatural idea ought to do so. See, here comes Micky with his daily flowers. Do you know that really among those who have been anxious about you, Nora dear, Michael ought to stand quite high. You have no idea of how he grew to look, through all that time of your great danger—But don't let us talk about that time. We have you among us once more; that is pleasure enough to counterbalance all the past pain—to me, at any rate."

"When," asked Nora, smiling a little because she saw what a great effort Celia made to appear confident of her friend's restoration to them, "did you come, Celia? I thought—I don't think it was part of my dream when I thought you and I had parted for ever, and—"

"A dream, of course; only a dream," put in

Celia, hurriedly. "In real waking times it would be impossible, dear, for you and me to part for ever; but curious things *do* happen often in dreams."

"Tell me," pleaded Nora, her own clear thoughts reading how her changed appearance had shocked Celia, "how you came to me, and —and where everyone is. Oh, Celia, may I know? I ought not to ask—I am sure I ought not—but it is like a terrible thirst to me, the wish to know."

"I don't know what you remember," said Celia, very sadly. "Lord—Mr. Poynz," she corrected, remembering how Nora had left them before Mark Poynz had become Lord Keston, and feeling that only the old familiar names could be recalled to her after her terrible illness, "brought you here, straight from London to Miss Gifford's cottage. I believe you had not the brain-fever then, Nora dear, and were conscious of coming, but you would have lost all recollection of it now. As soon as ever the crisis was past, I was allowed to come. Oh, what an anxious time that was for us in Brighton!"

"How good of you to come from Brighton to me! Is Mrs. Pennington there now? And is

she quite well? And are you going back to her soon?"

"Not very," said Celia, in her sober, unequivocal way. "Not until you are able to come too, Nora dear. Why do you look so grieved, or shocked, or something?" she added, astonished and even alarmed by the sudden pallor and misery of Nora's face. "Don't think sad thoughts, dear, or you will not grow strong again so fast as we wish. But the sea air will soon give you your old colour; and mamma will be so glad to have you with her again."

"I—I don't know where to go. I have no home now in all the world."

It was not the first time such words had fallen drearily from Nora's lips, and Celia received them, as she had done before, with a speechless gentleness, and a long pitying kiss; for her sympathy, loving as it was, had never been like Nora's in its power of lightening all sorrow to others, by devices born of utter self-forgetfulness.

"What is that?"

Nora had lifted her head to hear, and she asked the question very suddenly in her nervous weakness. But Celia only smiled, knowing

no answer was needed when she saw Nora's rapt gaze upon the tall grey spire among the trees.

"This is St. Thomas's Day," she said, "and Mr. Foster has gone to the village for service. The extra services are never held in the little church here in the park. Is not the chime pretty, dear?"

"Yes, I think so," said Nora, very low; "and yet, when I heard it first, my head began to ache—I wonder why?"

"Perhaps," suggested Celia, as utterly ignorant of any sad association with the chimes as Nora was utterly oblivious of it, "it is because you have been for a long time in such perfect silence. I think them so pretty, Nora."

"Pretty!" echoed Nora, her grave upward glance perplexed a little. "They are terrible, I think, or—or very beautiful—I cannot tell. I have heard music, just as I hear this, and not known whether it made me happy or sad. I—I do not wonder you smile, Celia, but you are very patient with me. I shall know better, and understand it all better, perhaps, when I am quite strong again. You will like to go to church, of course. Let me stroll a little way farther with you."

Their way led them past the little church in the park, and when they reached it Nora stopped with her hand upon the gate. She knew that if she went farther, at her creeping pace, she should cause Celia to be late for service, and it was here that she would best like to rest. So when Celia had passed on, she sat down in the porch, with her soft fur cloak wrapped round her, and a great restfulness in her thoughts as well as her attitude. So still it was when the bells had ceased, that Nora bent her head with a dreamy, childish wonder whether she could hear the Winter grass growing among the graves. And just as vaguely and dreamily as the old romance flitted through her mind, did the dim remembrances of the past time—the shadowy memory of joys which she was not sure that she had ever really felt—the softened pang of tears which she was not quite sure that she had ever shed. The one thing of which she was keenly conscious now, was that life had been given back to her, after she had parted from it; and that her feet had been guided back with tenderness from the brink of an open grave. And now how good it seemed to live! Sitting even here, among the dead, how beautiful life seemed! Even in the flower-

less, fading Winter time, everything seemed to *live*. Her glance went upward from the little quiet churchyard to the clear blue Winter sky, and Nora's thoughts rested, as they so often did, upon the memory of Helen Archer. There was no bewilderment there, and the minutes went by for Nora in a new and sweet tranquillity. But, suddenly, in one instant, this tranquillity fled; and Nora, shrinking back in her corner of the porch, pressed her hand upon her heart, as if she thus could still its swift and violent throbbing. All the repose had vanished now, for Mark Poynz had opened the churchyard gate, and was coming towards her. And while he did so, her thoughts rushed wildly to and fro, grasping nothing; because of the strength and power of that one bitter cry—*It might have been!*"

But Mark saw nothing of this. He only saw her sitting, rather wearily it seemed, back in the shadowy porch; her eyes looking unnaturally large and dark in her delicate face; and a settled shadow in them as of unshed tears.

"How long will it take for the plait to grow again, Nora?"

He said this easily and very naturally, he

thought, as he stood beside her, and lightly touched the short wavy locks; but he could not help his voice betraying what it was to him to see her once again—given back to him from the gate of death.

"It is not right for you to sit here, my darling," he said, very tenderly, as he gave her his hand to rise; trying so hard to hide his deep anxiety, and to suppress his almost unconquerable longing to fold his strong protecting arms about the slight and frail young form. "You remember this spot, don't you?"

"I remember," she said, trying, as he did, to speak with ease, while her heart was full. "I remember well how Kerryline Brougger dyde ov the krewill usidge ov ur usban'. I was glad to see her grave again."

"Is there any other grave you wonld like to see, Nora?"

"Oh! so much, so much!" she cried; then bowed her head in her hands, and sobbed broken-heartedly; for she had been too weak for the bold effort at self-control, and the tears could not be kept back now at will. "I have so longed to know—where it is?" she whispered, when at last the violence of her grief was soothed by Mark's quiet words. "If I could but

have stayed with her—after. Oh! Helen, my dear, my dear!"

"Your staying in that room where she died, could not have kept you near her, Nora," Mark said, with quiet earnestness. "But if you thought so, let me show you how very near you are to her now. Come, my dearest. It is but a few steps."

There was a low iron rail around the grave, and Nora's fingers clung about it, as she stood trying to thank Mark for his thoughtful act; trying, uselessly, because her eyes, in their great wistful earnestness, told him all.

"You will like flowers on the grave, I think, Sweet," he said, "instead of a stone. But Helen's name is so precious to me too now, that I have had it—you will soon see the little tablet, dearest; and you will be as glad as I am to have it on the chancel of this peaceful little church, among our own people—yours and mine."

"Oh! Mark." The cry came in real anguish from her lips, as the old sorrow came surging up to overwhelm all else. "Do not say it. It can never be. Oh! please, please let me try to forget. I—I wonder how long Celia will be?"

"She promised us to go to church this morn-

ing," Mark said, turning his haggard face from her sad gaze. "We knew you would like her to have the change, and she consented at last to leave you—to me. O my beloved, what a long, long time they have kept us apart!"

"Nora," he said, changing his tone suddenly as he met her sad beseeching glance, "what do you think of Miss Gifford and her old ayah? Come, tell me something about them—*anything*, only let me hear your voice as we saunter homeward. There, lean all your weight upon my arm. How tall your illness has made you look, my love; and so white too—but so beautiful! Do you know I begin actually to think Graham was right when he once told me that no one looking at you could imagine beauty in any other height, or size, or expression. I tried so hard to disagree with him, and failed so pitifully, love."

"Now," he added, presently, seeing what a sad quietness fell upon her when he spoke of those old times, "tell me what you think of Miss Gifford's nursing, and the wonderful flowers she has even in this Winter time."

Nora told him, with no dearth of gratitude, of the kindness that was shown her daily and hourly at the cottage; and then, woo'd on to

talk, and led to talk of this cottage life because Mark saw she did not shrink from that, she told at last, in her puzzled, gentle way, of how upon that night when she first woke to consciousness Miss Gifford had, in her sleep, poured for her and given her the right medicine; of how the old nurse seemed to understand, and had bidden Nora take it and say no word to wake her. All this the girl told, simply because her companion tempted her on to talk to him ; and so when in her last pause he begged her very earnestly to relate the whole scene to him once again, just exactly as it had occurred, she complied with genuine surprise.

"I think," she said, humbly, when she had done as he wished, "that the trouble she had taken for me, and the long watching and confinement which she had in her great kindness undergone in compassion for me, caused this. And I have so feared, ever since, that she might herself fall ill."

"But *I* think," said Mark, speaking quietly, as they walked on under the leafless boughs of the old oak, "that it may not be a new thing to her. We shall see."

"I shall never see again, of course," said Nora, trying not to speak with regret, and

wondering why Mark should show no anxiety himself over this story of hers. "I—I think I shall very soon be well enough to go, and—I must."

"My child, my restless, whimsical little lady, are you in such haste for Brighton? Think how happy Celia is in this dear little peaceful parish. And you have no idea how fond the people are growing of her. Ah, you are wondering how I know, I see. Do you imagine that because the Place is still closed and uninhabited, I may not prowl about here now and then for my own purposes—the very personification of a Wandering Jew? And have I not discovered, quite to my own satisfaction, how very content Miss Pennington is in this happy valley?"

"I remember," said Nora, thoughtfully—but her whole face brightened at the thought of Celia's pleasure—"how I used to fancy her enjoyment of Heaton, when she first came here—one beautiful Summer Sunday. I pictured it all, and what she would tell me; but I have never heard——"

"Never," assented Mark, promptly; for it did not need the sudden sadness in her eyes to remind him of Celia's return from her visit to Heaton. "But now you see, don't you? And

we are told, Sweet Heart, that things seen are mightier than things heard."

"Yes," assented Nora, knowing how the sight of Kerryline Brougger's gravestone had recalled so vividly the half-forgotten words which Willoughby Foster had said to her upon that happy day when she had last visited the little church; "but it is best to remember *nothing*."

"I think it best to remember everything," returned Mark, in the cool and placid way which was so skilfully dissipating her nervous, painful shrinking from him. "And nothing lives more clearly in my memory than your first visit here, my Sweet; and how we stood together by the lake—we two alone—and I told you the story of the last Lord Keston; and how I had a feeling that he was neither guilty of the crime they laid to him nor—dead. But you would not recollect."

"Oh yes," she said; but could not trust herself with other words.

"You asked me what first made me doubt that which everyone else believed," Mark went on, in his earnest way, "and I told you I would explain that when we went over the old house together. You are not strong enough to

come with me yet, my precious one; but when we bring you home from Brighton, I must show you what first gave me the hope of being able to destroy an unjust suspicion."

"I must not come back," whispered Nora, as steadily as she could; strengthening the determination never to walk with him again in this delicious quietness and solitude, yet resolved to say as little as possible about this need. But when Mark stopped in his great seriousness, and she saw the steady determination in his eyes—while he yet could only speak to her with such great tenderness—she knew that her answers, resolute as she might strive to make them, could not move him in his love and care for her.

"Nora, my darling," he said, "I want there never to be anything but the clearest truth between you and me, and so I must tell you one thing now. In your illness, you could not guard the secrets which had been crushing your young life so pitifully. My love—oh, my love, do not shrink from me! To whom should they have been revealed but to me? I know that you have never uttered a word to me that is not truth, Sweet Heart, but you have not told the whole truth, and what you do not tell is a

terrible burden to you, which I would wholly bear. It cannot increase the weight upon me, but would lighten it. Can you not feel that yourself, my own beloved?"

"No, oh no," she cried, with the old pitiful lifting of her hand to her head. "I may not tell—I dare not tell. And when you ask it, Mark—when *you* tempt me, it is so hard to keep my vow."

"Listen, Nora," said Mark, his chest heaving with the emotion which he tried so hard to suppress. "I know so much, that it will be dangerous—there will be danger for others who do not deserve it at your hands—for you to keep the rest from me. My darling, my love, you are little more than a child after all, and you must be guided by those who have lived long in the world of which you know so little; and who can bring out into the light, and seize and disarm too, this vile foe with whom your weak little hands, tied and bound as they are, can never grapple in the darkness. Now listen to me, Nora, and just answer the questions I ask—I will make it easy for you, because I know so much. When Dr. Armstrong bound you to that vow, was it until any stated time, or indefinitely?"

"It was not Dr. Armstrong," faltered Nora.

"I understand all that, my dearest. It was indefinitely, then?"

"Yes."

"And the promises, however worded, consist in this: You are not to betray your parentage, or any of the confidences of Dr. Nuel Armstrong; or to listen to—— What was it? We were always puzzled by that one promise."

"Never," said Nora, just as a dying man might repeat his physician's words of doom, "to listen to a word of marriage from—you."

"From *me*?" questioned Mark, gently drawing her to him that she might not see his face. "That was not what you said, Sweet Heart. Tell me exactly."

"Never," repeated Nora, in the same dreary, hopeless tones, "to listen to a proposal of marriage from—Lord Keston."

"My love," said Mark, with a laugh which startled her, "how it hurts you to say that name! Do not utter it again—yet; and presently it will grow so dear to you that you will wonder how your lips could ever have faltered over it."

"Oh, Mark!" she cried, lifting her clasped hands, "you will never tempt me to break my

vow? I should know no happiness if I broke it, because I made it to my——Oh, Mark, you *cannot* understand!"

"I understand very clearly and perfectly," he said, in his most gentle and caressing way; "and you shall not break your vow, even though I know the man to whom you made it. No; you shall utter Lord Keston's name often and often, in love and tenderness, and yet you shall never break your vow. *I* can give my beloved a test of my love too. Did you think the power was only Dr. Armstrong's? And yet you knew that you yourself were mine, my own!"

"But the power is not what you think," faltered Nora. "It is far, far greater."

"Is it?" questioned Mark, his tone full of concentrated passion, as he felt how this power had been exercised over her; "then it will need a little extra strength to throw it down, that's all. Any man who is wronged can right himself in time, Nora, and I am not afraid of any power that scoundrel may possess. Hush, my dearest! I know what you would plead. I understood all that before we met to-day; but we will not speak of it. What *your father* tells me of Dr. Armstrong I will believe, but never one word of what Dr. Armstrong tells me of

your father. Armstrong may do his worst now. I will let him lay bare his own villainy, and you and I—don't shrink from me, Sweet Heart. Even in my passion I will not forget to what words I have promised that you shall not listen. But not even *your* entreaty can make me forget his villainy, or my own determination to be rid of him. It will keep me here for a time, that is the worst. But, while I am separated from you, I shall feel that you are gaining health and strength by the sea; and you will think of me sometimes, working for you, my own love—and thus doubly and trebly working for myself."

"But you ought to rest," said Nora, very wistfully, as she glanced up into his lined and troubled face.

"I look very old, do I, Sweet?" he asked, with his rare, pleasant laugh. "This has been a terrible time to me—I trust you may never know *how* terrible—but do not think of that. Think of happy, hopeful things. Think only of growing strong and well yourself, and that will be quite enough to make me the most vigorous fellow in Surrey. Oh, my beloved, when we return together, not Surrey alone, but all the counties in England could not contain a happier fellow. And yet—and yet, my dar-

ling," he added, with a gleam of the old quizzical laughter in his eyes, "you shall not receive any proposal of marriage from Lord Keston."

CHAPTER XII.

Then with eyes which seemed to darken his dark cheek,
Let him go free, he cried;
He hath his curse.

MOORE.

THE low arched avenue among the yew trees, was not the usual and frequented approach to Heaton Cottage; for it was cut in an exaggerated curve from the park to the flower-garden at the side of the house; and—as if to make it still more private than its own gloom and semi-concealment naturally, or rather artificially, made it—its little iron gate-way was screened entirely by laurels, skilfully planted beyond. Against this low gate, on the day before the arranged departure for Brighton, Nora stood deep in thought; while scarcely a breath of the wintry air touched her, and no sound disturbed the silence there.

Quietly and unperceived, she had left the

house, because Celia had happened to mention that Miss Gifford expected Lord Keston; and she would stay here in the shadow and solitude until she could feel sure that he must have left the cottage again. Never, if she could possibly help it, did she venture to meet Mark, knowing how her own courage wavered in the presence of his, and how hard it was to feel they were really to live their lives apart, while he, with such quiet determination, acted as if it need not be so.

"Just as if," Nora whispered to herself, "that sad truth were not truth; and as if I had not promised so solemnly. Yet he himself has said I shall not break that vow, and *he* would never tell me a falsehood, even——"

A step upon the gravel, far behind her, snapped the thought like the snapping of a thread; and there came into the girl's eyes a strange, mute yearning which was new to them, and inexpressibly pathetic.

"Have you heard Miss Gifford's last decision, Nora?" Mark asked, coming up to her just as if she had been expecting him, and addressing her quite calmly and placidly; though his gaze, as he stood opposite her at the gate, would have told her so much more, if she had ventured to

look up and meet it. "She has decided not to go to Brighton yet—herself, I mean," he added quickly, because, watching her so anxiously, he had seen the shadow of a great disappointment fall on her face. "I do not mean that she has delayed the departure for all of you, Nora darling—only for herself. She would not have done even that," he went on, speaking heavily a little, for he was certain now of what he had feared ever since Nora had crept from her room and met him for the first time—that she longed to avoid him, and to leave the spot where he could see her so often, and where his home lay, "only that she feels her presence necessary here—for a time. She had intended to go with you and return alone earlier, but she has arranged otherwise now, because Mrs. Pennington is coming up to-morrow, and will take charge of you and Miss Pennington; while I go—only to take charge of Foster, eh, Sweet Heart?"

"Shall *you* stay in Brighton?" asked Nora, utterly failing in her effort to make the question indifferent, while her heart beat with such a twofold fear; the fear for herself in his presence, and the fear for the long days when she would have to live her life without him.

"No," he answered, gently. "I wish I might, though. Yes, I wish it in spite of you, dearest. Do you dream for a moment that I should be stayed by your coldness or caprice? Ah, my beloved, you little know me if you imagine it. The strength of my love could not be turned aside by such a trifle—— What, a real smile at last? How precious they are to me, now that they come so seldom! I remember thinking, on a certain day, which you of course have forgotten, when I had the privilege for the first time of careering—isn't that a foine Oirish wurrd, Miss Paddy?—across the bog behind Borak, that I never saw such a lovely smile in my life. But of course I have had time to change my opinion since then, haven't I? Ah, Nora, Nora, such a blush! And yet you coldly bid me leave you, and tell me we must live our lives apart—we two! My child,—my love, if you could for one moment feel as I feel when I speak thus, you could never say what you say, even—even," he repeated, laughing at last, as he laid his hands gently on her shoulders, and looked down into her eyes with untold love and pride within his own, "to have your words treated as I treat them."

A little pause, while Nora stood very still,

the faint colour coming and going on her delicate face, as she suppressed her pain as well as her love.

"No, Sweetest, I am not going to stay in Brighton," Mark repeated, breaking the silence at last, in a tone which told nothing of the strong will resigned; "for I have business which must take me away, for a little time. It will be very hard to leave you there, Nora; but I come that I may hasten our reunion; and I leave you with old friends who love you, and in a spot where you will win back the old bright health and girlish spirits.".

"I am quite well now," said Nora, wistfully. "Quite well, though I am not like what I used to be—I can see that in the face of everyone who looks at me. It is not because I am—ill now. It is, I am older—and——"

"So much older, Nora, darling," said Mark, with an involuntary movement, as if he must take her in his arms to comfort her; but refraining instantly, "that you ought to be wiser. But never mind; probably wisdom will come with the grey hair. Now I must go on to meet Doyle in Guildford."

"Is Mr. Doyle here again?" questioned Nora, with the same mixture of shrinking and longing,

with which she thought, or spoke, of all the friends of her old life.

"Yes, dearest; Doyle is rather busy in this neighbourhood just now. I believe he would tell you he had a 'case' here. He laughs heartily at being sent for to help our London solicitors— Another blush, Sweet? How delicious it is to see them once more! Do you know Doyle recognised *our* house in a moment," Mark added—while again the blush rose at hearing that pronoun which he used as if there could be no thought, for a moment, of his possessing anything which was not hers, too— "from the sketch he had seen in Mrs. Corr's cabin."

"But I thought your house was closed, and had been closed ever since——"

"And shall be closed," concluded Mark, promptly, in her timid pause, "until its master and mistress go to live there together, in a joy the old house never has known yet. No one shall occupy it until then, my love. Did you not know why I never had the doors opened to any other rule? But I must not let you stand any longer. Even with all your waywardness, you are so unutterably precious to me, my own beloved, that I must even shorten these

few happy minutes, and send you in to rest."

"Good-bye," said Nora, simply, but evidently without a thought of staying, when he did not wish her to do so.

After passing the gate, he could not look back and see her walk to the house, and it was well he could not; for the tears she had so bravely kept back in his presence burst from her now beyond restraint, and she stood in the gloom and solitude, with her face hidden in her hands, sobbing piteously.

"I cannot help it," she moaned to herself, when, at last the tears were stayed in utter exhaustion, and she stood with her hands upon her temples. "I thought I was not such a coward. I was not once—I think. But," she added, a wan smile breaking the tremulous sorrow of her lips, though it never touched her eyes, "I shall be stronger presently. This illness has changed me so. Celia said she scarcely knew me. Indeed, indeed I scarcely know myself. But I suppose everyone feels so—so very weak, and low, and helpless after brain fever. If—when I go away from here, I shall grow strong again, and—fit to work, and—and able to remember how solitary my life must be."

"Nora, Nora, dear!"

The gentle call reached her where she stood; but, following the call, even before Nora could answer it, Miss Gifford came into the avenue at Dr. Armstrong's side.

"I sought you everywhere about the house, my dear," she said, her face brightening when Nora came at once to her side, "until Doctor Armstrong suggested you might be here—a good guess, was it not? He has come to say good-bye, so I may go on and speak to Corr, leaving Dr. Armstrong to take you into the house."

"It is not good-bye I am come to say, Nora," spoke Nuel Armstrong, as soon as he had watched Miss Gifford out of sight, "though that plea served as well as anything else for an excuse to reach you. You knew perfectly well, even while she said it, that that was not true. Not very probable!" he cried, with a hard, forced laugh, while she saw, in real fear, how his face worked with a passion which was headstrong now and desperate. "*Good-bye!* Pah! Is all my love, and toil, and patience to end in such a coward's speech as that? Stay, Nora, I have something to say, and I must say it here. Unless," he concluded, using craftily his knowledge of her; "you wish it said before

that sleepy-looking woman, who has no right to hear a word."

"Shall you be long? Is it much you have to say to me?" asked Nora, wearily; as she stood very still and pale against the dark green yews.

"It need not be much," he answered, all the old suavity of tone lost in his great eagerness. "I have need only to tell you I am ready to take you now, Nora, to your poor father. No wonder you look surprised, my pet; for it has been a hard, long task for me to track him; or, rather, it has been a long enterprise, and *would* have been a hard one if I had not done it for *your* sake, and with my thoughts full of you the while. My darling, have I not all my life worked for you? And is it strange that I should be the one to win you your wish at last, and crown your life with happiness?"

"That," said Nora, with proud quietness, "you can never do, Doctor Armstrong."

"Your childish freak of concealment I easily understood and excused," he went on, making a strenuous effort to hide from her the passion which was fast growing beyond his control; "but, you see, fate and fortune did not help you; and I know how glad you will feel now

to transfer all responsibility into my willing and able hands. My beauty, I do not ask you to come with me to-day; I would not hurry you so; for until this minute you have not guessed that I was on my way to you with the good news, and the power (as well as the will) to give you perfect ease and happiness at last, and such enjoyment as life has never contained for you before. No, I will not hurry you so, Nora. I will go with you to Brighton to-morrow; and you will be stronger presently, and we can pursue our journey. Ah! Nora, to think what rapture that meeting will be for your wronged and ill-used father. So well I know how your heart yearns to him—the parent who has so unjustly all his life been deprived of his daughter's love and compassion."

"Doctor Armstrong," said Nora, calmed by her very fear of him, as thus he tempted her through her keen sense of duty, "I would follow my—my father anywhere, if you would put it into my power to do so. But even though you profess to pity him, you will not help me to go."

"Nora," he cried, passionately interrupting her, "I am here for no other purpose. I have travelled and toiled and waited for that end alone

—to secure his safety, and to unite you. I have paved the way perfectly now, and I have only one task left, to leave my darling in her father's care."

"If you will tell me where he is, and let me go to him, I shall be grateful to you all my life," she said, earnestly. "Mr. Pennington will take me."

"I shall take you myself," said Nuel, with a sudden hard determination in his voice. "I shall come to Brighton with you to-morrow—why not? The Penningtons are old friends of mine, and the Fosters will be glad enough to welcome me. Then we will arrange it all at our ease. In a few weeks' time, my pet," he went on, again stifling his eager violence, "you will look back and wonder how you could ever have felt so hopeless and solitary as you looked when I found you here to-day. I know how it was," he added, hurriedly intercepting her reply. "You were thinking of yourself as shunned and suspected, because you fancied the world must know your parentage. "Don't think that wretched thought again. The world need never know. The world never *will* know in the future I have arranged for you. Will anyone ever suspect what has gone before,

when you are my dear young wife—honoured, admired, esteemed, and so fondly loved? Darling, who else would give you the wealth of affection I have given you all your life? Who else would give up for you what I have given up?—but I do not wish to speak of that. I did it because I loved you, not to *buy* your gratitude. I could not help giving my time and strength and thought to you, because my heart was yours—you see that, Nora?"

He asked the question suddenly, for even in his selfish vehemence he was shocked a little by her stillness and her pallor.

"I only see your cruelty," she answered, very low. "Let me go to my father without these hard conditions, and I will go to the world's end. If you will not, I—will not go."

"You will not go!" he cried, his voice harsh and quick and cruel, as he had never allowed her to hear it before. "You will not go, you say? You will not go with me, after all these years of seeking and wooing you? You are to escape me at last, and choose another? No, by Heaven, that shall never be while I live! I have borne enough, and done enough, for you now, and I claim my reward. I *demand* it, Nora! I am no boy to be trifled with at your

pleasure. Mine is no new love to be set aside carelessly for—any other man's. You shall feel that, Nora. You shall realise that a man who in his middle age, has set his heart upon you, is not to be lightly rejected for one who—who, would scorn and insult you if he knew you as I know you; while I—I love and seek you through all. But I swear he shall know all the degrading truth——"

"Oh! let him know," she cried, in her longing for help and guidance. "Oh! let him know, and end this terrible secret!"

"He *shall* know—but not until I have taken you from his derision."

"Miss St. George, you are lingering here too long. Come into the house with me, will you? I found I had forgotten rather an important message for Miss Gifford, so I had to turn back."

Mark had come upon them so thoroughly unawares after passing through the little gate, and had spoken with such readiness and apparent ease, that even in the silence following his words, Nora stood as he had found her, her eyes wide and feverish in their courage, yet her lips apart, and her breathing quick and irregular in her fear.

"Miss St. George will return to the house

when she chooses," put in Nuel Armstrong, with an insolent mockery on his lips, "and she will not choose just at present. I am not likely to let my cousin stay out to injure her health; I have too much consideration for her, and too much experience in my profession. We need not detain *you*."

"You could not," said Mark, coolly, as he took Nora's hand. "Even *your* power has its limits, Dr. Armstrong."

"I should have fancied," said Dr. Armstrong, his wrath breaking forth unrestrainedly now he felt that Nora was leaving him, "that, by this time, you would have left off interfering between relations. You have brought about mischief enough through your sneaking practices."

For an instant Mark turned upon him, with tightened lips and indrawn breath; then he remembered Nora's presence, and turned away again with quiet contempt.

"Do as you choose," he said; "I will not interfere."

"Nora," Dr. Armstrong said, letting his eyes pass over Lord Keston's face with a supercilious smile, but evidently suspicious in that moment even of Nora, "I can trust you—in

any company. I can trust you to recollect what matters relate solely to your own family, and on what subjects you have bound yourself to secrecy."

"Miss St. George is not one to break a vow," rejoined Mark, with calm disdain, "even though it were wrung from her by the meanest lies."

"You speak courteously," observed Nuel Armstrong, smiling as he hissed the words slowly, in his cowardly fury; "but that, of course, is what we are tempted to expect from our aristocracy. I am glad you have reached your height among them at last. The position must naturally gratify you. Only try to escape an unexpected descent. It would be mortifying and humiliating, to a lofty soul, to return to the untitled herd from which it so lately sprang; and—I may possibly live to see you do it. One other thing I would tell you before we part—and what I say I mean, Lord Keston—If I hear of you trying to worm yourself into my cousin's confidence, or to learn secrets she has sworn to keep (for honour's sake), I shall hold back my hand no longer."

"Do your worst; that is, if you have not already exhausted your worst."

Mark said this with unruffled disdain, for, though his wrath burnt fierce within him, his heart was full of compassion for Nora.

"Nora," cried Dr. Armstrong, throwing off, at last, every shadow of compunction, and letting loose his rancorous hatred to the man opposite him, "I will keep silence no longer—even for your sake, and for that you have this man to thank, who wears the title which has been so fatal to your house. When you recall this scene, remember that *I* would have spared you, but that his malice and arrogance wrested all forbearance from me. No need to tell you to whom I refer, Nora, when I say I will bring *him* here now. He shall face his verdict, and then, when the truth is known, you will see how lowly this man will value—your father's daughter! Then you will see who was your real friend, and loved you; knowing that very truth, which will excite his contempt. It is time for my revenge now, and I will take it."

"If you feel yourself able to go through with it," observed Mark, with easy negligence, "you cannot begin too soon."

"You speak without understanding," rejoined Nuel, with a fierce, furtive glance into the stern face of the younger man.

"No; I fancy I understand," he answered, in his leisurely way, "and I fancy I can gauge your power, sir. You threaten that you will bring to England a man who—if known to be alive here—would be captured by law, for a crime committed more than eighteen years ago. No matter whether he has escaped the letter of the law or not, he will be ruined for life as an English—well, simply an English gentleman, let us say."

"Ruined for life!" sneered Nuel. "That is a novel way of regarding the impossible future of a criminal. I have need but to swear to his identity—and, by Heaven! I will do so, unless Nora herself pleads with me,—and he dies as a murderer should!"

"You will do your part promptly and skilfully, I have no doubt," said Mark, as he led Nora away. "Why should you delay, through any trifling qualms at all? Put the finishing stroke to your long careeer of personal ambition and animosity. I shall be prepared. I will even court that trial which you threaten. And, in the meantime, as you know quite well, you have nothing to fear from Miss St. George's betrayal of a secret of yours."

"Nora," Mark whispered presently, as he

paused a moment, in doubt whether Dr. Armstrong would follow them to the house or not, "do not tremble so. It will be all well when he has done his worst, as now he threatens to do. I have been expecting this. I would myself have hastened it long ago—I mean, as soon as the power was mine, on my uncle's death,—but, in my search for you, Sweet Heart, how had I room for other thoughts and projects? He will scarcely, even now, act before I am ready for him; for, when I have left you, my love, I shall have no strong impulse to keep me lingering here. And then, when this last cloud has passed, we shall—— Dearest, do not let that old shadow fall across your face again at words of mine. I have made a promise myself, have I not, to help you in keeping yours? You shall *not* listen to any plea of marriage from Lord Keston; and yet, my beloved, you shall love him—just as he loves you."

CHAPTER XIII.

Latet anguis in herba.

VIRGIL.

Have I not had my brain sear'd, my heart riven,
Hopes sapp'd, name blighted, life's life lied away?

BYRON.

THE arrival in Millwall Docks of a Swedish steamer from Gothenburg was not an event sufficiently rare to create excitement on that account alone, yet the excitement in the midst of which two gentlemen landed from the *Kung Ring* was no new thing, as they understood well; though it was quite apart from that inevitable noise and seeming confusion with which every vessel is hailed into an English port.

"If I had been brought here blindfold," said the elder man, speaking in a low, refined tone, while the jargon and the *patois* went on

around them, "I should not have distinguished this as the English shore."

"All the better," said Mark Poynz, promptly, while he led his companion towards the cab which had been called for him. "I do not wish you quite yet to feel that you are at home in England."—"Even if we are detained in town for a longer time than we expect," he added, coolly, as they drove away, whilst his shrewd and quizzical eyes rested upon a man who, as they waited him, raised his stick to summon a passing hansom, "we shall probably find a wholesome excitement in the detention itself."

Lord Keston's companion was a man of little more than forty years of age, yet the stoop in his narrow shoulders, his scanty hair, and the dreamy, inlooking expression of his eyes, gave the impression of a much older man. A strong contrast he was to Mark, yet there was some strange, subtle resemblance in the voices of the two men, uninterfered with even by the slightly foreign accent of the stranger. This resemblance struck Mark himself later on, as they stood before the fire in a private sitting-room at their hotel, talking earnestly and thoughtfully; and he spoke of it

at last with a little amusement. While his companion paused before answering, with a nervous hesitation which seemed habitual to him, Mark walked to the window, and looked down into the street. He had not stood there many minutes, before a man came sauntering from a shop opposite, and crossed directly to the hotel.

"We may just as well avoid all fuss and publicity," observed Mark, coolly, as he turned from the window, "and hasten through this unpleasant affair. By this time my telegram will have reached Doyle at the Inns of Court Hotel. Arthur, my dear fellow," he added, earnestly, laying his hand for a moment on the shoulder of his friend, "don't look so downhearted. Remember you have nothing to fear as an *eventual* barrier to your return to the old home and life, to the restoration of your daughter, and the public acknowledgment of your innocence. You have not, indeed; and no man would shrink at going through a little temporary harass and delay, to ensure such a result."

"Tell me of——"

"No," interposed Mark, with that resolute firmness of his which was so quiet, "I will tell you nothing of Nora. What a persistent fellow

you are, to return to that request again and again, in spite of me! No, you would only say I exaggerate everything. If there is one subject I dare not trust myself to talk of just now," he added, both his eyes and voice most earnest, "it is that which fills *my* thoughts as well as yours. Come, you who have so bravely spent these years of exile and denial, would never show the white feather at the very last—when such a different life is opening—just because we must needs stumble over the threshold. I'm afraid that adroit and patient officer is very tired of keeping his eye upon me. He so thoroughly deserves his reward at last, that I will go and anticipate it for him."

So when, ten minutes afterwards, the man who had waited until this hour to arrest Arthur Poynz, came up to the room to act upon his information, Mark came with him; and the departure of the three seemed quite simple and natural, and altogether unlike a legal arrest.

CHAPTER XIV.

If we are wrong'd, why, we can right ourselves;
If we are plagued and pester'd with a fool
That will not let us be, nor leave us room
To do our will and shape our path in peace,
We can be rid of him.

CLOUGH.

"DOYLE," whispered Mark, in his leisurely way—the Irish lawyer sat anxiously scrutinising the faces in the police-court while Lord Keston spoke to him—"Dr. Armstrong looks pretty confident of holding the winning card, eh?"

The laywer nodded without a word, his attention thoughtfully fixed upon Nuel Armstrong while he was sworn. Then he followed every word, as Dr. Armstrong testified to the fact that Arthur Poynz had been suspected of administering poison in the year 1858 to one Catherine

Say, at Heaton Place, in the county of Surrey, and had escaped before the conclusion of the inquest; throwing his hat and cloak into a certain lake of deep water, with intent to elude the law by a supposititious death.

All this Nuel Armstrong was slowly and distinctly making evident in his answers, when the presiding magistrate broke the thread of information with a question which—as far as the listeners could tell—had at that moment struck him.

"Were you sworn upon the Gospels?"

"I was sworn," returned Nuel, with the air of scornfully dismissing an irrelevant subject, "in the usual way."

"Do you," continued the magistrate, unmoved, "believe in the Gospels?"

With the calm and supercilious smile which so often stirred his thin lips, Dr. Armstrong glanced into one or two of the faces around him, as he answered.

"I believe in them of course—as men generally believe in them—as detached portions of the history of a certain epoch."

"Do you believe in them?" persisted the magistrate, without the slightest change in the expression either of his face or voice.

"I acknowledge," Nuel answered, still with the smile upon his lips, "just what all sensible and thoughtful men acknowledge—that they are trustworthy records of a particular age. And beyond that, I consider myself bound in honour to speak the truth, and the whole truth, after being sworn upon them."

"There is no need at all for you to enlarge upon the subject," returned the magistrate, briefly. "Your answer can only be a word. Do you believe in the Scriptures—yes or no?"

"In a general way, and for this purpose, I——"

"Attend to my question, if you please," interposed the magistrate, with emphasis on the reiterated query. "Do you believe in the inspiration of those Gospels on which you have been sworn? If you do not, your oath cannot be taken."

"I—no man believes in the whole," asserted Nuel, his plausible smile growing an effort to him, as his fury was roused. "But I consider myself bound on my oath to utter only what is the truth."

"Then," observed the magistrate, in a rather raised, quick voice, "you do not believe in a God."

"I do not understand such a question here," returned Dr. Armstrong, his lips tightening more and more, as his eyes fell upon the bent head, and easy, apparently inattentive expression of Mark Poynz.

"It is a simple question. Have the kindness to answer it simply too."

"I do not understand the term."

"I think I may safely say then," remarked the magistrate, pointedly, "that you are the only man present who does not do so."

"There may be a Being of——"

"No circuit of words, if you please," was the reply, uttered with growing emphasis. "I call upon you to say if you believe that there is a God?"

"I have already answered that question," replied Nuel, his lips growing hard and dry upon his teeth.

"No, you have not."

"I have already said I believe in portions of the history where that name is mentioned."

"You do not believe then," insisted the magistrate, impatiently at last, "in the Gospels on which you have been sworn?"

"I do not——"

"You do not? Stand down, if you please.

I will not allow any one to be accused by one who dares stand here and deny his Maker; or publicly avow his disbelief in the Scriptures on which he is, as a witness, sworn. Stand down."

* * * * * * *

"Lord Keston," whispered Mr. Doyle, his face red in his irrepressible excitement, "is our witness able to appear?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER XV.

Then be not coy, but use your time;
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.

HERRICK.

THE soft grey haze of twilight was creeping slowly upwards, veiling sea and sky; and, through it the lights upon the pier at Worthing shone dim and blurred; while now and then the flash from the distant lighthouse pierced the mist, and then seemed to die out suddenly, as if its strength had been exhausted by that effort.

With the faint grey mingling of sea and sky before them; the long chain of lights upon the shore behind; and gay life and idleness about them; the groups lingered; talking, reading, or

thinking, upon the West Pier at Brighton. The bandsmen were silent just now in their little raised pavilion, and the great waste of chairs around them was almost unoccupied; yet there was a goodly crowd of figures moving to and fro in this evening hour.

Near the pier-head; where the gloom, so subtly creeping from the water, seemed to pause, as if the light and gaiety beyond had stayed it on its way inland; two little groups had met and joined, while many pairs of idle eyes rested upon them. Leaning back on her seat, facing the people, not the sea, Genevieve Foster sat, with a novel in her hands; but her eyes, though fixed upon its pages, had a sullen expression in them for which the novel could not be to blame. Near her, sitting sideways, with one elbow on the back of the seat, was Willoughby; his usually merry eyes full of perplexity, and his words breaking off every now and then in real and uncharacteristic embarrassment, as he sought to win his sister's whole attention. A few yards away, Mrs. Pennington walked slowly to and fro upon her husband's arm; and following them came Mrs. Foster and Celia, talking cheerfully together. Will's eyes went a little further still, to where Nora stood very

still against the outer edge of the pier, looking out across the dusky sea, with lovely dreaming eyes. He saw that others watched her too, and he smiled a little, knowing how unconscious she was of any admiring glances; but the smile was very short-lived, and swiftly his gaze grew anxious again, and returned to his sister's face.

"You don't help me at all, Gena," he fretted. "I certainly expected you would feel for mother, if not for me—and yourself, and suggest some way of breaking it to her."

"If it is quite impossible for you to discuss Victoria's prospects, except in such a provokingly funereal tone," observed Genevieve, without glancing up, "pray don't discuss them at all, with anybody."

"But if you tell mother without preparation——"

"How *terrible* it would be!" put in Miss Foster, with her supercilious smile. "How very terrible! Victoria has chosen her own husband (as any sensible girl would do), and married him without bridesmaids or cake! Oh, poor Willoughby, to have to break this terrible, overwhelming news to his poor mother!"

"You put it kindly, I must say," Will

answered, angrily. "No wonder I dread your telling mother, if *that* is how you look at it."

"Then how do *you* look at it?" she asked, in a scoffing tone; but her face grew a trifle paler as she spoke.

"How do I look at it?" echoed Will, indignantly. "Why, as anyone who has a grain of feeling in him—or of honour—must look at it. She knew right from wrong, and truth from falsehood. If she didn't at first know a gentleman from a sneak, she must now have known one from an unbeliever and a liar. And if she did not know how to act as a lady, she might at any rate have behaved with ordinary womanly reserve. To think that my father's daughter should have joined that villain and married him—knowing what she must have known."

"If it has been an unwise step," observed Miss Foster, icily, "she will suffer, not you."

"I declare," said Will, his subdued voice full of rage, "I'm tempted to think you have no heart at all. For pity's sake, leave it to me to tell my mother this miserable news. I detained you here to beg for your help and advice. I don't want either now."

"Then I have done you good," smiled Gena. "If you considered that you needed help in dis-

closing the fact of your sister's marriage to Dr. Armstrong, you must have been rather weak or out of sorts. I am glad you feel no longer so."

"If Doctor Armstrong had courted her openly and honourably; and she had chosen to be such an idiot as to accept him, even knowing all I know now," fumed Will, "I would not have made any trouble for her, by putting difficulties in the way. But to do as she has done; to let him show himself the liar he is; to accept the burnt-out ashes of his regard; to fly at his call; to marry him in secret, and voluntarily share his shameful and degraded reputation! Good Heavens! Genevieve, how can you know it all, and yet be so unmoved?"

"I see it a little differently," she answered, with slow distinctness. "Tory had allowed Dr. Armstrong to win her affection, even while, perhaps, he was tempted to pay court to Nora St. George's fortune. And now that the law has made good use of a peculiar phase of his belief, and meanly turned it to account against him, she gives him the regard he had successfully sought, and fulfils an old promise to marry him."

"Genevieve," whispered her brother, in real

surprise and even pain, "can you really look at this disgrace as you are pretending to do? Or do you say this only in your pride? Do not fear. I am not going to seek *pity* from anyone. And I'm sure, if you are afraid of Nora fancying *you* are humiliated——"

"What has Nora to do with me at all?" cried Miss Foster, rising quickly, with a cold, unmirthful smile. "Don't drag her name so constantly into your conversation, please. You have no idea how wearying it is. But I do not ask so impossible a favour as you think, so don't look crestfallen. I am going away in a day or two. I am going to Paris, to an old school-friend of mine, and I shall not hurry back. *You* shall take your turn now as the recipient of mamma's advice and sympathy, and—and senseless praise of other girls. Pray give her plenty of Nora's society, and Celia Pennington's, and she will be content, and not at all sorry for my absence."

"Oh! Gena, how unjust you are!" cried Will; but she was strolling on now, and by a sign she bade him leave her.

"How miserable it is!" he mused, as he slowly turned. "But—yes, I daresay she will be different when she comes back from Paris. Poor mother!"

With the utterance of his mother's name in his thoughts, came the remembrance of what only *he* must tell her; and with a sigh he went on to seek her; slowly, very slowly, while he wondered how he could lighten the blow for her. His eyes wandered longingly to Nora, where she still stood looking far away, so absently and dreamily. The young figure seemed very tall and slight in its mourning dress, but the short, pretty face was no longer white as the white fur that muffled it, but had regained a little of its old soft rose-tint.

"No," thought Will, staying his willing steps, "it would be unfair to ask Nora. How could she utter a word of consolation to mother, while she knows Armstrong so thoroughly; knows how persistently he sought her up to the last moment when he dared to venture into her presence; while, I suppose, all the time he was pretending to care for Tory? No, I must not ask help from Nora. I—I know what I will do."

His step quickened a little in that moment of relief, for he had caught sight of his mother, with her arm in Celia's. Joining her, and taking her other arm within his own, while, in a new, anxious, almost timid way, he begged

Celia not to go away; he led them from the pier to his mother's pleasant rooms upon the parade, and there he told her of her daughter's flight; while Celia cried a good deal, and spoke very little; and yet was so gentle and tender with the unhappy mother, and so quiet and compassionate, that afterwards, when Mrs. Foster looked back to that sad hour, she fancied that Celia had been a great consoler, and had made the shame and sorrow less for both herself and Will.

It was a short story, though the mother's tears interrupted it so often, and made the telling of it take a long time. Early on the previous morning Victoria Foster had left home, professedly to spend a day or two with a young friend who lived at Hove. That afternoon, as Willoughby sat writing in his mother's lodgings, while she and Genevieve were out, he had received a letter from his younger sister, posted in Dover. She told him she had been married on the previous day to Dr. Nuel Armstrong, at the Church of St. Stephen, in Walbrook; that they were on their way then to Paris; that she was very happy; and desired him to give her love to her mother and Genevieve. Such a thoroughly heartless and selfish letter it was,

that Will pretended just now that he had lost it, and told the story in his own way.

"We can do nothing, I suppose," moaned Mrs. Foster, at last. "Tory is of age by her father's will, and knew the man she was marrying. But you will go up, and see the register at St. Stephen's, Will."

"Yes, as soon as ever Lord Keston comes down. The law proceedings are all over now, and I fancy he will be here to-night."

* * * * * * *

The band had begun to play upon the pier, when Mark Poynz entered, and went slowly along it; glancing at every figure he met, but with no eagerness of scrutiny, for he knew how instantly he should recognise the form he sought when he came near enough to see it. Many eyes followed him—for he was not one of the usual loungers on the pier—and they grew inquisitive too, trying to reconcile the slow and leisurely step with the evident concentration of both gaze and thought. But, unconscious of any glance bestowed upon him, Mark went on; until at last, at the very end of the pier, he saw that his search was over; and in his sudden great content, as well as in

his fear of startling Nora, his step slackened instead of hastening. So he went softly up to her, and stood beside her, with his hand on hers; and though she started a little, the grave thoughtfulness within her eyes died instantly in the light of her great joy—a joy which she would never have let him see had he not come upon her unawares.

"Ah! didn't that startle you—the sudden splashing of the oars below? What a ghostly little boat, to come gliding so unexpectedly from under the pier!"

Nora said this nervously, turning away from Mark to look down upon the water; for she had remembered now, and the childish tears rose to her eyes when she felt how unable she had been to hide from him the gladness his coming gave her. And seeing this, Mark bravely still (while his own strong impulse tempted him to shatter resistlessly every barrier between them) restrained the words which he knew that she felt she might not hear.

"Where are they all, Nora?" he asked, as his warm strong fingers held her hand within his arm. "Hannah told me—I am so glad to see Hannah back in your service, darling—that you were all on the pier."

"So we are," said Nora, grateful to him for speaking only thus. "Is—is Miss Gifford not come, then?"

"No, Sweet. She is awaiting you—at home."

"I do not understand," faltered Nora, moving slowly on. "I have no home."

"Ah, I forgot that," said Mark, in his cool, quizzical way, and with no sign of the effort it cost him to speak to her without betraying all his heart held of love, and care, and tenderness. "Well, we must go and see how the mistake has arisen. She certainly told me to bring you home soon, and to say that she awaited you there."

"She has been very, very kind to me," said Nora, earnestly. "I hope I may see her again."

"You have yet to hear, Sweet Heart, the reason for her not coming to Brighton. It is rather a long story, and can only be told at home. How soon will you come with me?"

"I wonder where Celia has gone," said Nora, wondering why Mark spoke of home with such a new and happy tone of voice; but never guessing how his utterance of the word made her own eyes soften with an inexpressible hope and happiness. "May we walk on, and look for her?"

They met Mr. and Mrs. Pennington presently, but could find none of the others; so they strolled from the pier, guessing that Celia had unthinkingly sauntered homewards with the Fosters.

"Then will you tell us nothing, Lord Keston, until we reach Heaton?" asked Mrs. Pennington, laughing, as they stopped for a last look across the shadowy sea. "And do you really expect us to start to-morrow?"

"If you please," said Mark, with rather unusual gravity. "I have my horses here, and will drive you at any hour you will arrange. Perhaps Foster and his mother will come with us. Miss Genevieve is going to Paris, Will tells me, and her sister—but I can tell you these items of news by-and-by. Nora, will you walk on with me to see Mrs. Foster? You are not too tired, are you? Ah, you look so much better, my beloved. I never can be grateful enough to the sea-air for bringing the dainty roses back. And presently, when you and I—My love, do not shrink from me. I am not going to break my word; only, when we go home, I have a story to tell you; and then you will tell me something about that love-test of yours. I daresay you will never see Dr. Armstrong

again, dearest; but possibly you may find the test fulfilled, even in spite of him. We shall see. Why are you stopping? Oh! is this where Mrs. Foster lives? Nora, darling, I have sad news to take to her; but I am not afraid, because I am taking you to her at the same time, my own beloved."

CHAPTER XVI.

Whose glory was redressing human wrong.
TENNYSON.

INSTEAD of guiding his horses round to the cottage (when they reached Heaton next morning), Mark took them through the park to Heaton Place, and drew them up upon the gravelled sweep before the wide, arched door of the silent old house.

"Nora, isn't it strange?" whispered Celia, in a little flutter of delight and excitement. "But I'm so glad Lord Keston is really living here at last. Mr. Foster will be so glad, won't he? See, there's Miss Gifford in the hall. What a beautiful place it is! This reminds me of the wild romances you used to invent in old days, Nora dear, where the people were for ever

coming unexpectedly upon marvellous old castles. Do you remember?"

"That's too bad a question," laughed Nora, softly. "Even *you* ought not to remember how silly I was in those old days."

"Not silly, dear," asserted Miss Pennington, soberly. "Only always so happy and content —with nothing. You used to astonish me often and often."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Mark, from behind Celia. "I refuse to believe it. No one could ever have been astonished by anything Nora either said or did. It was always so exactly what persons would naturally expect."

"You will never forget my excursion to Lambeth, I fear," said Nora, her cheeks very pink and her eyes very shy, as Mark led her across the wide paved hall.

"Never," he answered, coolly. "At frequent intervals all through our lives I shall remind you of that day—and many and many another, darling mine," he added, in a whisper.

The servant who had opened the outer door to them had thrown open a door on the right-hand side of the hall; and now Celia and Nora and Mark followed Miss Gifford and Mr. and Mrs. Pennington into the room to which it led.

"I think lunch is ready for us," said Mark, in his cool and leisurely way, as he closed the door behind them; "but I want you to spare us a few minutes first, if you will. We have a little story to tell Nora here, and I know she will like you to be present too."

He had drawn up a couch for Mrs. Pennington and Miss Gifford, but Nora had walked up to the wide, low window, and stood looking out thoughtfully; remembering well that this was the scene of that little water-colour sketch in Rachael Corr's cabin, and recalling that one day when Mark himself had told her the sad legend of this house. Was he going to tell this story again to-day, and not to herself alone? No. Evidently they too had heard it before, for Mark only said,

"We think that in this room we can tell you the end of the story better than in any other spot. Nora, do you remember it, or do you wish me to tell you any part again?"

"Oh, I remember quite, quite well," she said, her eyes fixed upon the spot where she had stood with him in the sunshine while he told her.

"This was Arthur's room," Mark said—"I will call him Arthur still, because, as you know,

the title never reached him. When I first came here (I was paying a visit to my uncle then), this room was filled with his machinery, and chemicals, and a hundred specimens of his odd tastes and pursuits, and I investigated everything; for such work and such experiments had a zest for me too. At last one day I made an unexpected discovery. I need not tell you how, Nora. That will do another time. I found that that one fresco—just above your head, Mr. Pennington—fitted into the wall with a spring, and, when taken away, disclosed a narrow, secret staircase. Some day, Nora, you will climb it, but not now. I can tell you what I found, just as well as if you had seen the little turret-room to which it leads."

As Mark spoke, sitting opposite Nora at the window—for she was sitting now, her eyes fixed thoughtfully upon his face, while she followed every word,—he rarely addressed anyone except herself; but the Vicar and his wife sat listening quietly, and did not seem to wonder why the story should be told to Nora.

"That turret-room opens to the battlements, by a trap-door, which cannot be stirred from without, but which can be opened from within with very little difficulty. In this dim little

room I found one or two things which—gradually, I think, not all at once—excited a strange suspicion in my mind. First, I found what seemed to me the remnants of an old balloon; but presently I discovered that the whole balloon was there, only cut into pieces. Then I found portions of a man's dress, an empty bottle, dry crusts of bread, and torn pieces of paper. For hours, Nora, I have sat in the gloom of that secret chamber, trying to bring my vague surmises into shape. I seemed to see so much, and yet, when I brought what I saw fully into the light, it dwindled into so little, for want of the key to all. Going back again and again to that story of Arthur's escape, I grew to feel quite sure that he had, by means of this little balloon which he had himself constructed, returned to the Place, and taken refuge in this unknown room; from which, one day long afterwards, he may safely have escaped in disguise, leaving behind him the clothes he had worn when he was supposed to have been drowned, some of which were afterwards found in the lake. Can you follow me, Nora?"

"Yes."

"Though I seemed to see that so plainly,

there were still, as I say, great gaps where I could fit nothing; and I was obliged to wait, only watching earnestly, lest the slightest clue should escape me. This was not my own house, and I had no right to act for the one who bore Arthur's title (even if Arthur himself were innocent, and had a right to it, as I firmly, and yet almost unreasoningly, believed —did I not tell you so, Nora, long ago?); so I could only wait. But, while I waited, I searched well for any trace of Arthur himself; and Miss Gifford must remember well how, sometimes, I wearied her with questions."

"Yes, I remember," Miss Gifford said. But she answered Mark's smile with one which was even grateful, as well as tranquil and content.

"But she never helped me in the slightest," Mark went on; "she was too loyal to her old friend, and too faithful to her promise; so, as I said, I had to wait. At last, Nora, came that day when I was summoned so suddenly—I will not recall that," he added hurriedly, when he saw how the colour left even her lips as that evening was brought before her once again. "After that the title was mine, and the power to act. You understand, Sweet? But then

began my search for you, and the other search was almost forgotten—almost, not quite, for I had put machinery into motion which worked on while my own misery—— Nora, we will pass that time by, and I will ask you if you remember telling me one day—that first day you were allowed to walk to the little church, and when I met you there—how Miss Gifford had given you your medicine in her sleep. Yes, I see how clearly you remember it," he added, following her grateful, loving glance across at Miss Gifford. "Nora, those words of yours seemed somehow to put into my hand the key which I so long had wanted. I went at once to Miss Kate, and told her what I fancied. I had no fear of her resenting my words, or discrediting yours; and she listened kindly, as I knew she would, whatever pain they cost her."

"She, too," added Mark, after a little pause, while his warm, clear glance rested on Miss Gifford's face, "had never believed in Arthur's guilt, only—it had all been so strange to her; so utterly inexplicable."

"But—but *she* did not give the poison—even in her sleep?"

This was Nora's whispered cry as she crossed the room and bent to kiss Miss Gifford's shaking lips. But Mark went on very quietly, only turning his eyes now away from her.

"She fancied at once, as I did, that this was the solution of the mystery; but as a suspicion and surmise that knowledge must have been kept in our own hearts, Nora, for the telling would have done no good, and only pained her uselessly. But, in her great desire for justice to be done, at any cost to herself, she followed up the clue, and at last, tempted on gently and imperceptibly, Miss Gifford's old Indian nurse—you know the gentle, kind old woman, Nora—confessed all that we had been unable to make clear. She, sitting sleeping in the outer room that night, had awakened just in time to see her young mistress pour the drops and put the glass to old Mrs. Say's lips. It had only taken two or three seconds, and before she could reach the bed, Miss Kate had put down the empty phial, and retaken her place beside the bed. The old woman, who had always known that her mistress, in times of great agitation, or illness, used to walk and act in her sleep, had been so urgently advised never to awaken her by a cry or a shock, that she would not make

a sound. Then, in the few moments of utter silence before the dying woman started from her pillows, she had resolved never to confess a word of what had occurred, as she felt sure it would be laying with her own hand the charge of murder upon her favourite. Remember, Nora, she was not an Englishwoman. She knew nothing, of course, of our law. She had only a vague fear of its power to put Miss Kate to death, if she betrayed her act that night; and with her Indian swiftness and cunning she settled herself once more in her seat, and made Arthur find it difficult to awake her when, a few minutes afterwards, the dying cry had aroused him and Miss Gifford.

"After this confession," continued Mark—there had been another little pause, and Nora had gone back to her seat now, and was once again following the words on his lips, her hands folded in her lap, and her whole attitude very still—"Miss Gifford at once gave me the clue to Arthur's whereabouts, and was far more anxious even than I was, that justice should at last be done to him, let the confession cost her what it might. I soon found him, Nora, and brought him to England; while Mr. Doyle, and my own solicitors, paved the way for us. You will not

understand that quite yet, I daresay. I need not tell you what Arthur had thought, poor fellow, all this time. Perhaps Miss Gifford is right, and he must really have suspected *her*, even against his will. It is hard indeed to think how else he could have accounted for the act; but he has not told me. When we reached London, we found that Dr. Armstrong had laid *his* plans too for our return, and we had not been an hour in England before Arthur was arrested. My dearest, turn your pitiful eyes away for a few minutes. This part of the story I hate to tell you. Armstrong's evidence—thanks to some stray remarks which Mr. Pennington had casually let fall in my presence when we were speaking of him, and which Doyle's natural sagacity followed up—was rejected as worthless. Then the old ayah made her confession, in a clear, straightforward way, which made it doubly convincing; and Miss Gifford herself did the rest. No need to tell you all that passed, or had to be looked into. But Arthur left the court a free man, acknowledged innocent of that old crime, whose shadow had so long rested on his life; and gratefully and hopefully he brought Miss Gifford back to her peaceful little cottage to rest. For

it had been a trying time for her, Nora; and for that it was that she stayed from Brighton when you went."

"And I," said Nora, wonderingly and sadly, "fancied it was because she was so tired of me, after the great trouble I had given her for so long."

"You should never fancy," observed Mark; but he lowered his eyes for a moment. "Nora, take your thoughts back again for a few minutes to that night so long ago, for I want to make it all clear to you. That balloon I spoke of was made, as I thought, by Arthur himself in this very room. The plan of escape, by its means, was his own, but it could not be done without help, and Miss Gifford helped him, and kept his secret. I need scarcely try to tell you how it was managed, because it will all grow so clear to you presently. He carried the balloon down to the boat-house on the lake-shore, while Miss Gifford, in the turret-room, slowly unwound the cord whose other end was attached to it; Arthur making deep footprints in the snow as he went. On the edge of the water he made the marks which next morning so thoroughly misled the police. Then from the roof of the boat-house, he entered the

balloon, throwing his coat into the lake; and Miss Gifford turned the wheel another way now, and gradually brought the little balloon to the turret-roof. The rest was soon done, just as I used to see it all. The balloon was wanted no more, and so was destroyed, food and a disguise were soon procured, and after a time, when all suspicion was dead (because the object of the suspicion evidently was so), he escaped from the old house, and left England in safety. He was clever, and he was fond of work, so he had no difficulty in earning a livelihood for himself, even when he persistently refused any help from Miss Gifford. But he had a far greater trouble than poverty, and—and I have that to tell you too, Nora."

Again Mark paused for a few moments, but Nora only waited in silence, sitting very still, and wondering why her heart began to beat so hurriedly.

"Dr. Nuel Armstrong knew that Miss Gifford had risen more than once in her sleep, and quietly and correctly ministered to the sick lady who seemed—waking and sleeping—to be in her care; but he chose to withhold his knowledge of this fact at the time when it would have left Arthur Poynz free from suspicion—why did you start,

my dearest? Is that the first time I have mentioned Arthur's name? He and my uncle were cousins, so I claim a kind of cousinship, too. Of course our name is the same. Had I not inherited the title, too, until he returned to receive it from me—his just due? Do you wonder, Nora, as I did, why Dr. Armstrong should have suppressed this probable solution of the mystery of Mrs. Say's death, and let the vile suspicion of murder hurry her young heir to the grave—as he thought? I can tell you now why it was. For some time a very beautiful Irish girl had been visiting an old friend of her mother's at the Heaton Vicarage, and Nuel Armstrong had chosen to fancy this girl for his wife. But Arthur Poynz had learned by this time to love her for something even beyond her beauty—her rare and exquisite beauty," repeated Mark, laughing a little as he watched the colour rise in Nora's cheeks under his steadfast gaze, "and so one day they were quietly married by the Vicar, and she stayed on and on, and seemed to forget her Irish home. That was little wonder," continued Mark, warmly, "considering what a home it was; yet I have since then known a girl who could think lovingly and tenderly even of such a home as that.

At the time of Mrs. Say's death, when Nuel Armstrong so promptly laid suspicion on Mrs. Say's heir, his jealousy had reached its climax, for he had been told by the Vicar himself of the marriage. You—you of all people, Nora—can understand how little any conscientious scruple would stay Nuel Armstrong in his jealousy and revenge; for he was as pitiless and as selfish nineteen years ago, in his pursuit of your mother, as he has been in these later years——"

"*My mother!*"

Nora uttered the word very softly, with her fingers locked, and her eyes wide and wistful. She had no thought for Nuel Armstrong. She had almost lost the story Mark had been telling her, in the new delicious pain of hearing her mother's name at last.

"Yes, mother, Sweet," Mark answered, very gently. "The beautiful girl who came alone to Heaton, and was left here for so many months, unsummoned by her cold and selfish father, was your mother; and—and, Nora dearest, the young master of this old house, who has lain so long, and so unjustly, under the shadow of a great crime, is your father. My darling," he cried, taking her hands in his

as she rose to her feet, "don't look so awed and bewildered. It will all seem natural to you very soon—when you have seen him. He only thought it would be best for me to prepare you. All that Nuel Armstrong told you of your father was a lie; coined to serve his own selfish purposes, and all the more a lie because it touched the truth. Dear, *he* never had a clue to your father's hiding-place; *he* never traced him, and brought a letter from him—as you betrayed in your illness that he had said he had—and your father thought much more of keeping hidden from *him* than from anyone who bore his own title. You understand that now, don't you, dearest? And presently you will understand how (to gratify both his passionate admiration for your beauty, and his cold and long-nursed revenge against your father) he strove with all his power to win your hand. There, we may let him rest. He has his wife with him now—poor girl!—poor girl!"

"And—my mother?" whispered Nora, not knowing what she asked, only longing to hear something of her.

"Your mother, dear," put in Miss Gifford, with a gentle kiss upon the girl's wistful face, "was

my dear friend, though I scarcely ever could leave this house to see her, or ask her to come here. You are so like her, Nora, that it was no wonder my heart went out to you that first day Mark brought you to my cottage—when, I feel sure now, he had guessed a little of our story, and wished to see if I recognised your name. Nora, dear," she went on, her voice sinking lower, "it was not long after his escape that—she died. And then she sent her baby girl at once to her father, Colonel St. George, in Ireland. It was Rachael Corr who took you, and I believe your grandfather made her take an oath not to divulge the secret of your parentage; threatening afterwards—when she had married Corr—that he would turn her from her house as soon as ever he heard of her doing so."

"I—I understand," faltered Nora, recalling one other day when she had expected to meet her unknown father. "May I go to him?"

"He is here, Nora," said Mark, stroking her hair gently as he spoke. "Are you rested now, my own dear love? Ah! you cannot silence me any longer. I am breaking no promise. If I spent every moment of every hour

in telling you how I love you (and I very easily and pleasantly could), and if I ceaselessly rehearsed our marriage topic, Sweet, I should still break no promise now, for I am not Lord Keston—only plain Mark Poynz. Now we will—— Nora darling, see! There is the real Lord Keston."

Trembling so strangely and pitifully, that her hand went helplessly out seeking a support, Nora stood with her eyes fixed upon her father. Each moment her breath quickened, her eyes dilated, and her fingers grew tight and convulsive in their tension. Still she made no step forward to meet him, and no call upon his name passed her white, parted lips. Celia, with all her ready sympathy, could understand nothing of this intense and painful emotion; but yet, in an uncomprehended sorrow, she turned her face away, because she could not stop her tears. Mark, standing apart and resisting bravely his almost uncontrollable impulse to put his strong sustaining arm around the trembling figure, turned away too at last, his chest heaving, and the lines gathering in his forehead. Still the girl never stirred; only now one hand was lifted and pressed upon her heart, as if its

throbbing had grown insupportable. With a troubled, torturing intentness, she read her father's face as he came up to her, her own growing whiter and whiter the while, and her eyes slowly darkening with a look which they had never known before. She was reading all the unuttered truth in that gaze of his; and when at last he called her by her name, she fell suddenly to her knees.

But when he raised her, and kissed her—kissed her again and again, on brow, and cheeks, and lips—then laid her head upon his breast, and whispered sweet and unknown words of endearment, she gently stole her arms around him, and the low broken cry of joy was for his ears alone—

"My father—my own father!"

She had known nothing of that likeness to her dead mother which had brought such immeasurable love into his eyes at sight of her. She had only seen the love there, and known it by intuition to be a father's love. Instantly, in the intensity of that moment of doubt and hope and longing, the truth had rushed into her heart, and filled it to overflowing with this new, delicious joy.

And it was well that Mark had told the father so little of his child; for the glad surprise could make even *his* joy the greater in this hour.

CHAPTER XVII.

Boatman, take this triple fee,
For—invisibly to thee—
Spirits twain have crossed with me.

UHLAND.

THAT wonderful day at Heaton Place was over, but the old friends had not separated. They had walked together through the park to Miss Gifford's cottage; and now, in the bright and warm little drawing-room, they lingered as if they did not know how night and darkness had settled on the world without. There seemed so much to say, and somehow nothing ever could be said quite rationally, and without countless wild and happy interruptions.

The wonderful change in Miss Gifford riveted Nora's eyes so often that once or twice

Mark intercepted his own laughing face, and reminded her that her eyes were too big to distend in astonishment. Then she would laugh too, with a little backward shake of her head, as a reproach to herself; but soon afterwards she would again find herself wondering over the difference that happiness could make in the dreamy, chastened face which had ever, until now, had such a settled shadow upon it.

"Of course you must be astonished at my happiness, Nora," Miss Gifford whispered once, guessing the thought which made the girl so gladly watch her, "for you could never realise the weight which for so many years has pressed upon me in my solitude. Not of suspicion, dear—never that; only of such utter bewilderment and mystification. I could but live in the past, and the past was so *very* dark."

"It must have been so utterly incomprehensible," said Nora gently. "But no one will let you remember it now." And Miss Gifford smiled in perfect certainty of this, knowing that, humbly as Nora had expressed it, she herself would be one of the most skilled in teaching her to forget.

"What a crowd we look here!" laughed the

Vicar, standing upon the rug, and looking round the bright little well-filled room. "What intruders we are, Cis!" he added, turning to his wife.

"I really never appreciated the real comfort of my cottage until to-night," Miss Gifford answered, cordially. "I have rung for tea on purpose to see Nora presiding, for I can scarcely feel sure even yet that she is quite well again, unless I see her employed. Arthur, will you spare her?"

"I can plainly see," she added, presently, watching the look with which Lord Keston took his arm from around his daughter, as she stood beside him, "what trouble the mention of that illness gives you. But remember, Arthur, that but for Nora's fever, you and she might not have met."

"I remember," he said, with a gentle, earnest touch upon her hand. "That is one of the things which to-night it is so good to remember."

"Kate," he whispered, presently, as his eyes followed Nora to the tea-table, "she is as beautiful as her mother, and more—more—*what* is it?"

"You will understand by-and-by," she answered, with a smile.

"This," said Lord Keston, standing to take his tea from Nora (for that one cup she would not let Mark carry), and looking round with rather a girlish dimness in his eyes, "is just my ideal of a home. I shall never be able to fit myself into any position of pomp or state again. Mark, you will have to relieve me of all that."

"But I don't understand it," observed Mark, just as coolly as if his face betrayed nothing of his immeasurable happiness to-night. "We have a villa in Florence, I believe, to which we retire —every man in our family—on his marriage. That's all I know of our future. I don't think we ever emerge from that spot alive; but I shall wait and see."

"I think I shall settle myself there for a time," returned the elder man, laughing a little; "and then I shall have a chance of seeing you and Nora during your travels. Judging from some stray remarks of yours, Poynz, those travels are to extend into a remote century. But, at one time or other, you must needs visit Florence; and you shall find me there—with others of our old friends too, I hope. But first," he went on, with growing earnestness, "I must see the

Irish home of my—my wife and child; the home where each of them grew up to girlhood."

"Oh! father, yes," whispered Nora, still close at his side. "We will go to Traveere. And it will seem so different now I know that my mother lived there—solitary, too, as I did. And you will see all the old——"

They were unshed tears that stayed the words, to Celia's great dismay; for how, she thought, could Nora care for that grim, comfortless old house, when she could live now in such a home as Heaton Place? And how, in this peaceful, pretty valley, could she think tenderly of that chill, bare bog?

"Nora," asked Mark—she had retaken her seat at the tea-table, and he sat down near her, leaning forward to address her very earnestly—"May I ask Mr. Pennington to marry us at Kilver? Will you not like it to be in the old church you have known so well, and by the old friend of whom you are so fond? Say *yes*, my dearest. You shall have no trouble beyond that."

"There is no trouble in that," said Nora, simply, but with the brightest, swiftest blush. "It is a very easy word to say, Mark."

"Thank you—thank you, my own love," he

whispered, from his full, glad heart. "That is what I have long been wishing."

Then, somehow, it seemed as if everyone had something to say in favour of this plan, and said it in a merry, glad excitement, which reached even to Nora, when Mark had so tenderly, yet so laughingly, won her from her sudden shyness.

And Mr. and Mrs. Pennington entered into the plan most heartily, and made wild assertions of how many the Vicarage would hold.

"What a rest it will be for us to escape, just at present, the inevitable rejoicings here," Lord Keston said, with a mischievous glance into his daughter's face, as he stroked the short locks of bright soft hair. "You will be more ready for them at your home-coming. But, Mrs. Pennington, will you really take all this trouble for us?"

"Trouble!" echoed the Vicar, genially. "All I can say is, that if Nora had decided to be married in any other church, I should have—should have been very much disappointed in her."

They all laughed at this fierce conclusion, but then to-night they were ready to laugh at so little.

"I have always wished, my dear," put in Mrs. Pennington, answering Nora's questioning glance and smile, "that you should, if possible, be married from the Vicarage; and of course you know how Celia has always wished it too, and determined to be your bridesmaid. We always consider you an Irish girl, you know—your father, I can see, will excuse me if I say I consider you so even yet—and so of course you ought to be married in an Irish church. I am quite well now—*you* say Brighton air has cured me; but I say it was finding you again, my dear—and so we will do wonders at the Vicarage, and you shall see how many it will hold at a push. Nat and Tom will be wild with joy to have you there; and I shall not be afraid of your leading them into mischief now, because Mr. Poynz will be with you."

"We shall be at Traveere, Mrs. Pennington," said Mark, hastening to lighten the trouble she had so willingly appropriated. "Don't you guess how delighted I shall be to exhibit my productive Irish estate to my own guests? Doyle hates Traveere (though I know he will come over to see Nora married), but Lord Keston, I hope, will stay with me there, and Foster. Miss Pennington, will you help me to

tempt him over to assist your father in his arduous task. I cannot be married except by my own clergyman, any more than Nora can be married except by hers."

"Oh! that will be nice," cried Nora, with involuntary gladness, when she saw Celia's blushing pleasure. But she soon repented the prompt exclamation, because Mark insisted on interpreting it in his own way.

Then there were countless questions of Nora's to be answered by Mark, who, though he had not lately been in Ireland, yet seemed to know everything she asked, whether of Rachael, of Kitty, of old Breen, or of the stray animals at Traveere.

Rachael Corr was to come and make her home again in the old spot, for Lord Keston had decided to give her one of the lodges at Heaton Place, and then Micky could live with her. Kitty would never leave Traveere, nor would Breen, if he could help it. Bran, poor fellow, had been shot some time ago; but Borak flourished still.

To all that Mark could tell her of the old home or friends, Nora listened eagerly; but it was soon told; and then they willingly resumed the discussion of their own immediate plans.

"I wonder," said the Vicar, thoughtfully, "whether we could not persuade Mrs. Foster to come to Kilver with her son. We must try. I think the change might do her good just now. Miss Genevieve will have left her, and she always seems well content to be with Will."

"The change will do her good in more ways than one," said Miss Gifford, involuntarily. "I think with Celia's gentle and constant attention, she will find it hard to fret even for her absent daughters."

"Mr. Pennington," said Mark, anxiously, as they stood to separate, after much merriment and laughter, "I hope you have taken all these arrangements in earnest. I never in my life was half so much in earnest as I am now."

"Or half so—happy, Mr. Poynz?" put in Celia, in her gentle way, as she looked wonderingly into his face.

"Or half so happy," he replied, with an intense earnestness which she had not expected; for just then Nora came up to her side, with still the brilliant light of joy within her eyes which had made everyone that day wonder over her beauty, just as her father did; for it seemed a new thing even to all these old friends, as it was to him.

"I only wish," Nora said gently, "that Will had come with us to-day."

"Better not," Mark answered briefly, yet with a tone of trouble in his voice.

"Nora, darling," he added afterwards to her alone, leading her on into the porch, "you understood what I meant about Foster? It will be all well in time for him, I firmly believe, but not quite yet, Sweet Heart; and I, of all men in the world, must try to soften the sorrow for him. Oh! child, so well beloved, can I ever forget how near I too have been to losing you? But," he added, with a sudden change of tone, as he folded her cloak more carefully around her, and gave her his first kiss, "surely very soon now Foster will see happiness lying in store for him —a happiness which will be perfect for him by-and-by. Nora, don't you already see with what pathetic surprise and enjoyment Mrs. Foster accepts from Celia the love and care which have never yet been really given her by a daughter. And when you and I have left them in Ireland, after our marriage——"

"I wonder," observed Nora, gravely, looking out into the darkness of the park, just as if her blush could be seen if she did not, "whether there is any change in that orange banner in

Kilver church, or whether it still always falls into one huge dusty fold, to hide the long nose of our dear Orange king, and make his profile into one perpendicular line."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"They err who say life is not sweet,
Though cares be long and pleasures fleet."

LOOKING like a speck on the wide stretch of bog, a curious machine was creeping slowly along the road between Kilver Vicarage and Traveere; and but for the fresh and girlish laughter which proceeded from it now and then, in its rather frequent pauses, it would have worn a somewhat funereal aspect.

"Don't you feel exactly like old times, Mr. Poynz?"

Nora asked this question gravely, as she sat (very upright and content) on her side the jolting old car from Traveere, and looked affectionately down upon Borak.

"If old times feel very comfortable, as a rule;

and—progressive," returned Mark, from his side the car, "my feelings resemble them exactly."

"I'm afraid," said Nora, her eyes wandering thoughtfully on beyond Borak's ears, "that I don't feel so changed as—as anyone *else* would be, by all I have learnt and felt since you drove me here before, Mark. I feel so happy, and—and quite young again; yet I ought to be very different."

"You ought," returned Mark, in his leisurely way, "to be a grave and elderly party with a mission. And you ought never even to smile; yet I have lately heard you laugh, just as if you were still the same Nora to whom I gave——"

"Why did you stop?" she asked, simply. "Were you going to say to whom you gave such good advice that day?"

"That," assented Mark, with gravity, "is naturally my predominant reminiscence of the day."

"*You* are not altered either—now," said Nora; and she could not help that beautiful soft light coming into her eyes as she turned them upon his face.

"Then you ought to address me decorously as *Mr. Bull.*"

"Oh, Mark," she cried, with a peal of sweetest laughter, "how trying your memory is! But," she added, with sudden demureness, as she folded her hands in her lap, "you called me *Miss Paddy*—just as you would now if I gave you the least encouragement. No, you are not altered in the slightest."

"Not since that day," acquiesced Mark, composedly. "But if you had chanced to know me *before* that day, Nora—of course without my knowing you—you would have detected just a little change now; just a little," he added, unconscious of the great earnestness in his voice. "But life has never worn a neutral tint to me since even the very beginning of that drive."

"Of that very drive? Why?"

"A very stupid reason, Miss Paddy, for a man of my years to confess to; but—I fell in love—— With Borak," he added, coolly, as he left his seat and walked round to her side the car; to ease the weight for Borak, as she knew; but, also, she feared to see the blush she tried to hide.

"I'm afraid you didn't quite appreciate poor Borak that day, Mark—didn't admire him very much I mean. I've thought since—especially the first time I saw you driving your own

horses—that you must have felt rather impatient with him once or twice when he used to stop."

"You did not think so on that day, and I simply decline to connect any later thoughts with that time. To tell you the truth, though, Sweet Heart, the more he crawled along this dear old road, the more I admired his paces; and whenever he stopped to take breath (and he certainly did it pretty frequently) I literally adored him. In fact my sentiments towards Borak combined a pleasant feeling of friendliness with a deep and respectful homage."

"See," she exclaimed, suddenly, and with genuine admiration, "he is going straight to Rachael's cabin. He hasn't grown out of any of his old thoughtful habits. How many and many a time has he waited for me here, just exactly the length of time I wanted; and taken me straight home—all of his own accord."

"But this," said Mark, gently, as he lifted her from her seat, "will be the last time, my own dear love."

Nora had so much to say to her old nurse—especially about that pretty home which awaited her in England, and where she would have

Micky with her—that when Mark showed her how Borak, feeling himself sufficiently refreshed, was walking solemnly on, she had still left unsaid the one thing which had made her heart so full, all the while she sat in the neat little kitchen; looking often at that pretty sketch of her own home, and feeling Rachael so much nearer to her from having known her father so well.

"I know—I know it all, Miss Nora dear," Rachael said, when at last Nora tried to tell her. "Lord Keston has been here already—*he* is not one to forget an old servant. He sat here for an hour this morning, and he told me everything. He told me of his return to England, and of the old home. He told me of Miss Kate, and how she, too, would come to see me to-day. He told me how you all arrived with him last night, and that the marriage was to be here, and so soon. He said Mr. Foster had come too, to help our Vicar; and that his mother was here with him, and already enjoying herself. And that Mr. Foster had gone over to Kilver this morning. And he told me—even laughing, and he was never one to laugh much—that Mr. Poynz had taken the old horse and car over to the Vicarage to fetch you, and had

had to mend the wheel himself before he could start; and of Kitty's delight, and everything. Oh! my dear, what a glad coming back this is!"

"Nora," said Mark, as they walked after Borak, while he sedately led the way in the empty car, "do you know, I think we shall not lose our clergyman at Heaton, even though the living *is* to be a wedding gift for the husband of your true little friend."

"Oh, I hope not!" she answered, earnestly. "Will and Celia could make each other so happy!"

"Indeed they could, and will, I think. Nora," Mark said, taking her face between his hands in the quiet road, and kissing her upon the lips, "how generous he was in his greeting to you, after—after he knew you were lost to him. It reminded me of your own description of him, on that day we drove along the bog before."

"You remember that drive quite well?"

"Pretty well, considering all things. I have a faint recollection of your informing me, as a fact beyond dispute, that England abounded in beautiful, highly-educated, and altogether charming Rosalinds, among whom I roamed at large; and that you thought it would be an excellent thing for you to have a few of their advantages."

"Oh, Mark, I never thought——"

"Also," he went on, tranquilly, "that Foster was a very celebrated man in this country, and that I was welcome to consume into an early grave with jealousy, if I chose. Poor Will!—No, I will never say *poor Will* again. His eyes are opening now, and one can see what happiness is in store for him."

"I believe," interpolated Nora, "that you must have forgotten the cheerful career you marked out for yourself, Mr. Poynz; when you should be *Fifty years of age and unmarried.* I always had a great wish to give something to that hospital."

"Indeed! The only observation I ever heard from you about it, was that the inmates must be very unusually comfortable, under those circumstances. Still of course you might have been secretly devoting your wealth to that good cause."

"I used to think," said Nora presently, her voice growing full of thought, "how I would come back to Ireland after my holiday Summer was over; and use the money grandpa left me, to give ease and comfort to those who, though they had lived around him, had never been helped, perhaps, at all, in those old days.

But it is no use thinking of that, because the money is not mine."

"I'm not myself quite so confident upon that head, dearest. I believe Doyle intends to claim it for you, in consequence of the peculiar wording of Colonel St. George's letter; as his term is *your guilty father*—you understand how Doyle intends to dispute that adjective. And then, my love, you can do as you will with your pocket-money, you know."

"And if I *have* forfeited it, as I have always imagined, I have found my father, Mark, and so it was well forfeited. I mean," she added, softly, laying her hand upon his, "*you* found him for me. Yet I had thought," she whispered, presently, with a shudder at the remembrance, "it was only Nuel Armstrong who could unite us. He—he said that ought to be my love-test, Mark."

"And was it not, Sweet Heart?"

THE END.

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